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SEPTEMBER 2004

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courts danger...

By BEVERLE GRAVES MYERS

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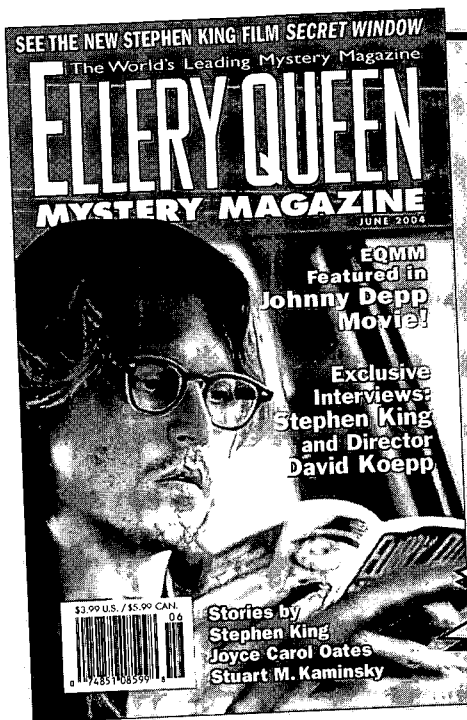
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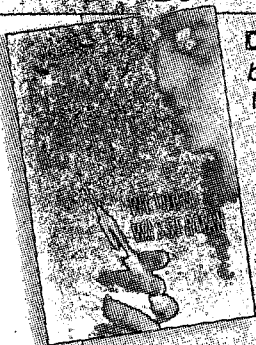
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Gritty, Raw and Riveting...



Damage Control

by Victoria Wasserman

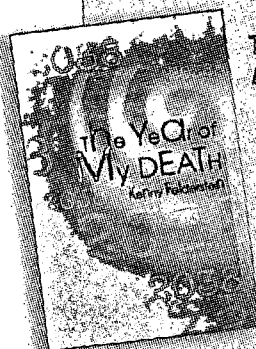
Medical Student Josh Hernandez's life is plunged into chaos when he threatens to expose a malpractice cover-up. When the Medical Examiner labels his brother's death a suicide, Hernandez sets out to prove it was murder. Before he knows it, he has put himself and those close to him in mortal danger.

Transylvania Red

by Bert Quint

A network news team covering the tourist boom in Dracula's hometown finds that communist secret police turned multinational entrepreneurs can be as scary as legendary blood suckers.

Publishers Weekly calls *Transylvania Red*, by former CBS correspondent Bert Quint, "a testosterone-heavy thriller." *Midwest Book Review* says, "highly recommended... original, dark and compelling."



The Year of My Death

by Kenny Felderstein

Mark Brown's highly promoted premonition lead to fame and fortune...would it also lead to his death? *The Year of My Death* is a fast paced thriller, but what lies beneath is the opportunity for hope.

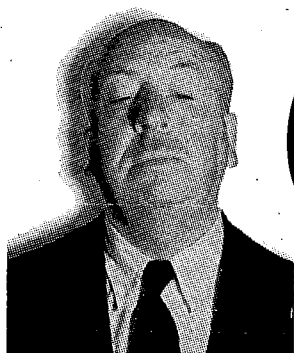
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EDITOR'S NOTES

LINDA LANDRIGAN

Kudos!

We go to press with this issue having been up late the night before at the 58th Annual Edgars Awards dinner on April 29th, 2004 in New York City. The awards, presented by the Mystery Writers of America, celebrate the best of the genre, with categories that include best novel, best first novel, best fact crime, and best critical work. We were thrilled that an AHMM story was nominated for best mystery short story: David Edgerley Gates's "Aces and Eights" (December 2003).

William Windom, co-star of the *Murder She Wrote* TV series, served as the master of ceremonies. The Grand Master, MWA's highest award, was presented to Joseph Wambaugh, a three-time Edgar winner and author of *The New Centurions* (1971), *The Onion Field* (1973), and most recently *Fire Lover* (2002). The Raven Award was given to *Vanity Fair* and its editor Graydon Carter for the magazine's true crime reporting, and to the Browne Library for Popular Culture at Bowling Green State University for its "commitment to preserving mystery fiction" through its extensive collection of detective mystery novels and manuscripts. A special award this year was presented to Home Box Office for its role in the creation of such crime series as "The Sopranos," "Oz," and "The Wire." A round of applause to all the Edgar winners and nominees. (See page 31 for a partial listing of the 2004 Edgar Awards.)

Congratulations are also due to this month's authors who have new books coming out. Brendan DuBois's latest Lewis Cole novel, *Buried Dreams* (St. Martin's Minotaur), hits the bookshelves July 1. Poisoned Pen Press recently published *Interrupted Aria: A Baroque Mystery*, a first novel by Beverle Graves Myers—whose first AHMM story, "The Franklin Fiasco," appears in this issue. Her historical series set in eighteenth century Italy features a castrato opera singer. This Louisville, Kentucky, native discusses her passion for mysteries, history, and opera in our conversation with her on page 48.

In addition, we have two new authors to introduce to you this month. Naomi Bell ("Night Highway") is a software developer in Cambridge, Ontario, who enjoys the outdoors, hiking, and riding her horse. This is her first published mystery story. Susan Page Davis of Clinton, Maine, also has experience with horses; for a while she studied farriery and shod horses. Her first novel, a historical romance, *Protecting Amy*, will be published in September by Barbour Publishing. "Mailbox Mayhem" is also her first published mystery short story.

NIGHT HIGHWAY

NAOMI BELL

Their voices drifted through the dispatch window, one urgent, one not. I gave up wrestling the manifest from the printer and looked: below on the dock, Anton, the highway driver, doubled over with his hands on his knees, and Jacques, the lead hand, laughing at him. I stamped down a spark of irritation, the first of a long day. We had two hours, less, to strip the highway trailer and get the freight sorted onto the city trucks for local delivery, and yet these two had found a way to waste time.

My irritation flared again when Anton reached into his coveralls for his cigarettes. No one in his right mind smoked surrounded by an acre of cardboard-packed freight. In my new reign I'd cracked down on the practice. I grabbed my coat and headed out onto the dock.

Anton had parked his trailer at the far end, the farthest door from the city trucks. Never missed a chance to be unhelpful, that Anton. As I picked my way through the crates and packages, Anton gestured blindly at his trailer, backed up to the dock and waiting to be unloaded. Smirking, Jacques sauntered into the trailer.

A moment later he stumbled out, bumping into skids, his jaw working.

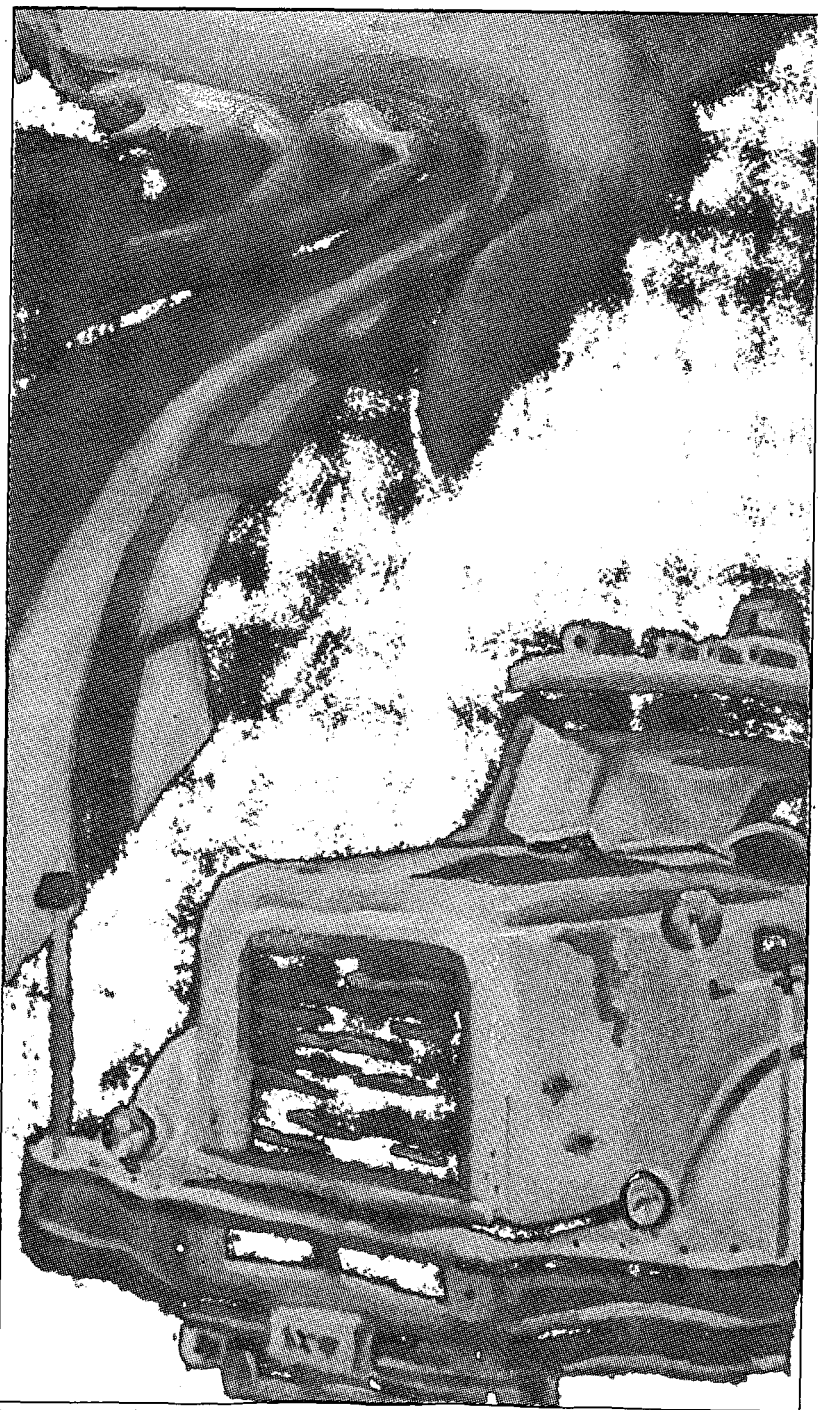
When I reached them, Anton turned to me, his weathered face clear of his usual obstinate half defiance. His voice shook. "It's not my fault."

"What do you think you're doing? Put that cigarette out."

He looked at the cigarette as if he'd forgotten he had it, and dropped it, crushing it under his boot. Without moving his head, he slid his gaze to the trailer, as if drawn there. "I thought it was a possum."

I looked at the trailer. It stood with its rear doors open, flush against the dock. The light from the dock half lit the inside, shining on the shrink-wrapped freight. Anton's tow motor stood at an angle, jammed against the trailer's sides, a skid still on its prongs. The tow motor idled gently, puffing gray exhaust into the predawn chill.

Helen Griffin



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I walked into the trailer, climbed into the tow motor cab, and turned off the ignition. The sudden silence made the hair on my neck prickle. The tow motor was skewed at such an angle I couldn't squeeze around it. I climbed out of the other side of the cab and dropped into the small space between the tow motor and the freight. The tow motor blocked much of the light from the dock and I stood half blind for a moment, waiting for my eyes to adjust.

The shadows lightened and shrank, and gradually I became aware of it, first as a pale gray shape, then with sharpening clarity. Bluish white, with darker gray points where the bones neared the skin. It lay curled on its back, facing away from me. A hand.

A human hand, severed at the wrist. Its fingers curled up like the legs of a murdered spider.

I backed out without taking my eyes off it, climbing through the tow motor by touch and memory. When I reached Anton and Jacques, we gazed at each other without speaking, comrades in a shared horror. With effort I said, "How did it get there?"

"I don't know," Anton said. "It must have been on the trailer when I picked it up."

Anton had picked up the trailer at our partner carrier's terminal in North Bay, four hours south down the highway. He'd have dropped his trailer full of southbound freight and hooked onto the northbound trailer, without ever looking inside it.

"All right, then." A hand on my dock. Bloody hell. "Did either of you touch it?"

They shook their heads, faces blank and silent.

"All right, I'm going to call the police. Just stay right here/don't touch anything." I heard the blather in my voice, and consciously shut up.

Jacques said, "What about the city trailers?"

I looked up at the big pale clock we lived and breathed by. In a few hours my customers would open their doors, expecting my drivers with their deliveries. "Load the rest of the freight, but don't touch anything that came on this trailer."

Back in the office, I found the coffeepot gurgling and the dispatcher prying the manifest from the printer. Sue Ellen said cheerfully, "The printer's broke again."

As Sue Ellen chattered on about her daughter's hockey tryouts, I called the police. The bored voice on the other end came sharply to attention as I explained what we'd found. The words came easily, pared to numbness by clichés. Too many horrors on the nightly news, I supposed. In the corner of my eye, I saw Sue Ellen grow still and turn to me, openmouthed.

With the police on their way, I looked up at Sue Ellen's wide eyes. She drew in a breath, ready with a flood of questions. I cut her off. "When the city drivers get in, send them out without the Tey freight. We can't move anything from Anton's trailer until the police say it's okay." Fully a quarter of my daily deliveries sat on Anton's trailer. I shied away from thinking about what my partner carrier, Tey Transport, would say.

I left Sue Ellen flustered and headed outside. I walked around to where Anton's tractor-trailer stood gleaming dully under the yard lights. I circled the vehicle, checking for damage, for some clue, but everything seemed normal. Anton had even put the chocks behind the wheels. Whatever I may think of Anton, I couldn't fault him as a driver.

I climbed into the cab and found Anton's log book. As I checked his odometer entry, a police cruiser drew into the yard and parked across the tractor's nose. A single figure emerged, stocky in winter parka and boots. I clambered down from the cab, log book under my arm.

The police officer stepped forward and revealed herself as a solid middle-aged woman. She said, "I'm Detective Sanders. Are you the owner?"

"Yes." I put out a hand. "Tony Loft. I called."

She looked past me to the tractor and the logo painted in black on the door, MCEWAN AND SON MOTOR FREIGHT. "I take it you're not Mr. McEwan. Are you the son?"

"No, the son packed up years ago and headed south. I bought out old Lou McEwan four months ago."

"And this is the truck?"

"Yes. I've done a circle check." I waved at the tractor's side. "There's no damage, nothing to indicate that it's done anything but go to North Bay and back."

"You're sure about that?"

"Sure as I can be." I opened the log book and showed her the last entry. "The start and finish odometers match the mileage to North Bay and back."

Sanders nodded. "Where is the driver?"

I led her around to the stairs and onto the dock. Jacques chugged around on the tow motor, loading freight into the trailers. Of the twelve bay doors, only six held trailers. In its heyday twenty years ago, McEwan and Son Motor Freight had serviced a busy network of customers across the North, with terminals in North Bay, Sudbury, Kapuskasing, and here in Quartz River. But time and mine closures had worn down the North. With no son to

take over, Lou McEwan had seen retirement inching away from him, his weary company stretched thin. Four months ago, I'd seen an opportunity to move from the assistant night dispatch supervisor at Tey Transport. I sold the Toronto house I inherited from my parents and bought out Lou. I jettisoned the unprofitable routes, retracted the company back to Quartz River, reorganized the dock, and used my training at Tey to improve service.

Two weeks later, the local sawmill laid off three hundred workers and closed its doors. Tey had wanted to pull out then. I'd begged and traded every favor I had to keep their freight. The drivers worked longer hours than they had under Lou, and earned less, but they had jobs. When I didn't have enough freight to keep Jacques on the road, I put him on the dock and gave him the title of lead hand so he wouldn't lose face. I lived in a two-room apartment above a grocery store and filled in myself for any driver who was off, and stayed awake nights sweating over costs. Old Lou McEwan sat in the local bar every night, drinking my money and telling the world how I'd ruined his company.

Anton stood where I'd left him, his back to the trailer, a cigarette trembling in his fingers. Before we reached him, Sanders touched my arm and asked me to wait while she talked to Anton alone.

As Sanders approached, Anton dropped the cigarette, still lit. It rolled away, the ember a glowing red point.

Sanders headed into the trailer. A moment later she reappeared, a few shades paler. She groped in her coat for a cell phone to summon reinforcements.

I leaned against a skid of breakfast cereal and tried to be patient while Sanders and Anton talked. Anton hunched into his coveralls, his gaze on the floor, the ceiling, anywhere but at the trailer. I watched them with an eye on the clock, the unprofitable minutes fraying my careful schedule. Finally, Sanders shut her notebook and walked back to me. Anton reached for his cigarettes.

Out of Anton's earshot, Sanders asked, "How long has this driver worked for you?"

"Four months for me. Before that, about eight years for Lou McEwan."

"Would you say he's good at his job?"

"Yeah, pretty much. He's reliable. Eight years, no accidents." I didn't add that Anton never showed up a minute early, never did more than his share, and never let a rumor go by without embellishing it. He kept the drivers simmering in a stew of gossip, half-truths, and ill will, for no reason I could see than for his own amusement.

Sanders said, "He says he picked up the trailer in North Bay

without looking inside. That sound true to you?"

"Yes," I nodded. "Anton is a highway driver. He takes a loaded trailer down to our partner carrier's terminal in North Bay, drops it there, and hooks onto a trailer loaded with northbound freight for us. Tey Transport has the trailer loaded and waiting for him."

"Tey Transport is your parent company?"

"Partner, not parent. They're a national carrier. They have customers up here, but not enough to make it worth their while hauling so far north themselves. So they take the freight as far as North Bay and we haul it the last leg to delivery. And we pick up from their customers here and run the freight down." And if Tey and I parted ways, they'd take their customers with them.

"So this trailer was loaded in North Bay?"

"Maybe." I shrugged. "It might have started out in Toronto or even Windsor and been manifested from city to city with freight being taken off and loaded all the way up."

"All right then." Sanderos consulted her notebook. "He said . . . he thought it was a possum?"

"Possums occasionally sneak aboard trailers down south and hitch a ride up here. The trailers aren't heated, of course, and possums aren't built for our winters."

Sanderos looked appalled, more indignant than when she'd thought the only casualty was human. "Yes, thank you, Mr. Loft."

A siren outside made us look up. A moment later more police appeared through the outside door, dressed in white crime scene suits. I left the police setting up lights and headed back up to the office to face the day's normal problems. The five city drivers, who should have been busy with their pre-trip work, stood lined up at the dispatch window like tourists in an aquarium. Their talk had moved on from the severed hand to gruesome tales of hunting accidents and highway crashes. They didn't know, I thought. Hadn't seen that forlorn dead thing.

Sue Ellen shot me a look over the row of baseball-capped heads, and between us we coaxed and bullied the drivers out the door. Once they'd gone, Sue Ellen focused on city dispatch, fielding pick up calls from customers, keeping track of each city vehicle's location, and how many square feet of trailer space it had free. She knew every side road and shortcut for a hundred square miles, and could identify the regular customers by their voices on the phone. The customers trusted her and the drivers obeyed her, and her expertise freed me to worry about everything else.

With the manifest from Anton's trailer, I phoned down the list of customers. Without giving details, I explained we'd had a delay,

apologized, and asked to reschedule delivery for tomorrow. Most agreed, but the hardware store and the gold mine rumbled unhappily. I apologized again and made promises I didn't know if I could keep.

I phoned a supplier to order parts for a tractor, went back out onto the dock with Jacques to look at a damaged skid, and trudged out to the yard to dip the fuel tanks. The cold gnawed at my face. A slab of arctic air had squatted over the North for three unbroken weeks, plunging temperatures down into the minus thirties. Locals took the cold prosaically, telling cheerful stories of great freezes past. I, of feeble Toronto stock, stamped and shivered and wondered if I had the stamina to last in the North.

Inside, I had just made it to the coffeepot when Sue Ellen glanced up and said, "Tony, Rick at Tey called twice."

Rick, chief of dispatch for Tey Transport, the face of the customer I most needed to please, and my ex-boss. In the hollow days following my father's death, Rick had dragged me north to Quartz River for a hunting trip with his pal, Lou McEwan. As we'd trekked through rustling leaves under a crisp November sky, the smells of hospitals, smog, and loss had leached out of me with every breath. I hadn't shot anything, but Lou had got talking about retirement, and by the time the trip finished I had myself a motor freight company.

A sure thing, Rick had said. Small outfit, established customer base. All it needed was an energetic manager to breathe new life into it. When the sawmill closed and Tey had wanted out of Quartz River, Rick had sided with me. I counted on him now.

"Tony! What the hell are you doing? The police called about a body on your dock!"

"A hand, just a hand." I realized what I'd just said. Rephrased. "Not a body. A hand. On the trailer we got from North Bay."

"Our trailer? That's crap."

I pictured him clearly, striding the length of Tey's dispatch, always on the move, always talking into a headset. Around him, ranks of dispatchers murmured into phones, plotting the movement of thousands of vehicles nationwide. A floor to ceiling video screen covered the front wall, each vehicle a bright point of light. Rick would pace and listen to his dispatchers and know without looking each vehicle's location. I said, "Rick, I don't want to get into whose fault this is. The police—"

"Look, I don't care what you're trying to pull." The steel in Rick's tone silenced me. "You get that freight delivered today."

"Of course we'll deliver what we can. But it's a crime scene. The police have—"

"Today. No excuses. You're on thin ice as it is." He slammed down the phone, leaving me with a dial tone and a new layer of headache. The freight sitting idle on the dock was the bedrock of my business. If I couldn't deliver the goods, Tey would find another carrier who could.

I took my anxieties out to the dock. The police had cut open the skids and pulled them apart, littering the dock with curls of silvery shrink-wrap. I brushed my gaze over a blue and white cooler, and a moment later looked back, realizing what it must hold.

Sanderos approached. "Mr. Loft."

"I need to get this freight out. Are you close to done?"

"For now." She eyed me. "Mr. Loft, do you have any enemies?"

"That would do this?" It hadn't occurred to me. "No, of course not."

"You don't see this as a warning?"

"No, this is nothing to do with me. This is some psycho."

Sanderos folded her notebook away, wearily. "There aren't so many random psychos as you might think."

I wanted her gone, and the hand with her. Death and body parts belonged in her world, not mine. I shook my head, certain. "This has nothing to do with us."

When I arrived the next morning, Jacques met me at the door, twitching with anxiety.

Anton was late.

I stared, feeling the first prickles of dread. "When did he leave?"

"I called North Bay," Jacques said. "He left around midnight. But I can't get him on his cell."

I looked at my watch: five A.M. He should have arrived an hour ago. Three hundred kilometers of snow and bush. The pale memory of the hand haunted me, and I couldn't stop myself from jumping to conclusions. "He could have switched off his cell," I said, not believing it.

Jacques nodded, playing along. "Or the battery's gone."

Neither of us voiced the real question, why was he an hour late? Accident. Breakdown. A moose lumbering onto the road. I thought of Anton stranded in a cold tractor in minus thirty degree weather. "We'll give him another fifteen minutes."

I helped Jacques load the city trailers, driving the tow motor with one eye on the clock. After fifteen stomach-clenched minutes, I parked the tow motor and headed for dispatch to phone the police.

"Tony." At Jacques's voice, I stopped, looked out through the open bay door. Out on the side road, a tractor-trailer-sized set of running lights bobbed through the darkness.

Jacques and I watched in silence as the vehicle neared our laneway. Let it be Anton. Let him have some bullshit excuse, but let him be safe.

The headlights slowed, sprouted a turn signal, and swung into our driveway. Jacques and I hurried outside. We caught up with Anton while he backed up to the bay doors. I shifted my attention to my expensive and not fully paid-for tractor, and the trailer Tey had entrusted to my care. With weak-kneed relief, I saw that, at least from the outside, both appeared unharmed.

Anton climbed down from the cab, whole, nonchalant, and smoking. My worry erupted into anger of shouting-match intensity, but before I could yell at Anton, Jacques beat me to it.

"Where the hell have you been?" Jacques closed in on Anton. "You're an hour and a half late."

"What?" Anton reached behind the seat for his briefcase. "Didn't Larry call you?"

Larry was the night dispatcher at Tey's North Bay terminal. Jacques blinked. "No . . . about what?"

Anton sidestepped us and headed for the office, leaving Jacques and I bobbing in his wake. Over his shoulder he said, "Tey didn't have the trailer ready. I didn't get out of there until nearly one thirty. Larry said he'd call you."

We reached the dispatch office, already filling up with Sue Ellen and the first few city drivers. Jacques said, "I talked to Larry. He said you left at midnight."

Anton tossed his briefcase on the table and headed for the coffeepot. "That can't be right."

Jacques looked at me. "I talked to Larry."

I watched Anton shake a sugar packet, flicking it against his thumbnail. I said slowly, "Your gate pass will have a time stamp on it."

Anton snapped the sugar packet back and forth. His eyes moved to his briefcase, but he didn't reach for it. "Guess I must have left it behind."

"Okay. I'll call the gate shack in North Bay, get them to fax up their copy."

Anton looked at me for the first time, his eyes turning as hard as quartz. He spoke to Jacques in French, which he knew I couldn't follow. Whatever he said, Jacques made a brushing off gesture and said, "Answer the question. Where's your gate pass?"

Anton's expression wavered, and for a moment I thought we might get some truth. But he saw the three city drivers and Sue Ellen watching, with ears like radar dishes. His face turned mean.

"What is it with you?" He poked the air with a sharp finger. "Get

off my case. It's not my problem that Tey held up the trailer."

I said, "Jacques, would you start stripping the highway trailer? I'll be out to help you in a minute."

Jacques nodded, fired a volley of French at Anton, and left. I turned back to my highway driver as he stood with his feet braced and his jaw thrust out, radiating mulish ill will. I thought him a fool, an obstinate, unhelpful carrier of complaints. But I had never, until this moment, thought him capable of any real harm. I would have asked him to step into my office, if I didn't think he'd score a point by refusing. I said, "Anton, what's going on?"

His face slammed shut. "I don't know anything."

I sensed Sue Ellen and the drivers focused on me, scenting blood. If I let Anton walk away now, my authority would evaporate with the exhaust fumes. "Anton, you give me an explanation right now, or you're done here."

"You think you can drive highway? Fine. You drive." He snapped open his briefcase and upended it onto the table, dumping log book, fuel records, inspection forms into a pile. He tossed the ignition key on top and stood back, triumphant.

I said neutrally, "And the cell phone."

He spluttered, but dug into his coveralls for the cell. He moved as if to pass it to me, but when I extended a hand, he fainted and tossed it onto the table. I guess I should be glad he didn't toss it on the floor.

Anton glowered, hackles raised. I let him glare, let the silence chip away. When I saw by a flicker in his expression that he'd understood, finally, what he'd done, I said, "You had a good job here. But if I can't trust you, I can't let you out on the road."

His face contorted in concentrated loathing. "If it hadn't been for you."

Anton blasted out and left me with a new set of problems. I looked around at the city drivers and saw faces as unyielding as windswept ice. These men were the public face of my company, and I needed their help. I said, "We're behind the clock already. Would you go out and help Jacques load the trailers."

Someone said something prickly in French, and sharp laughter crackled around the room. Someone else said, in English, that they were paid to drive, not to work the dock. True enough: I paid them by the weight they hauled; not by the hour. I pointed out that the sooner we loaded the trailers the sooner they could get out on the road and make money. They saw the sense of that, but even then would not budge while I stood over them. I retired to my office. A moment later I heard coffee cups being set down and the dock

door opening. With their help we got Anton's trailer stripped and the city trailers loaded in record time.

When the last city truck had pulled out, Jacques and I met on the dock and faced the next question. Someone had to drive Anton's highway run down to North Bay and back tonight. I couldn't send a city driver because I needed them on their regular runs, and I didn't know if my fragile alliance with Jacques would extend to turning his life upside down.

Jacques leaned against a tow motor. "So, what was that all about, with Anton?"

I said dryly, "Anton has chosen to pursue other endeavors."

"Those guys," he nodded at the city bay doors. "They're saying you fired him for being late."

"Is that what you think?"

Jacques took his time answering, turning to gaze at the dock, with its peeling paint and exposed insulation. "Old Lou seemed to lose heart these last few years, once his son moved south. Sue Ellen practically ran the place. Lou turned a blind eye, and some of the guys took advantage of it. Anton has always had a scheme going, and I guess he got used to setting his own agenda."

"Do you know why he was late?"

"Nope. And I don't want to know. But I'll say this: Anton has needed a smack on the head for years. It's just too bad he didn't have the sense to duck."

"Will you do the North Bay run tonight?"

He shrugged. "I never would have admitted it, but working the dock is not so bad. But someone has to go, and I guess it's me."

Jacques went home to sleep and I went back to dispatch to get on with the day under Sue Ellen's purse-lipped disapproval. By ten A.M. I'd had enough of the silent treatment, and retreated to my office. The phone rang: Jacques, his voice scratchy with sleep. "Tony, listen, I'm really sorry about this, but Janie called from Moose Factory."

Janie, Jacques's nurse wife, flew weekly to the James Bay community of Moose Factory to work in the health unit. I asked, "What's wrong? Is she all right?"

"She's fine, but one of the patients took bad. They're going to airlift him down to Sudbury, and Janie's got to go with him."

"And you got no one to watch the kids?"

"Right. I asked the neighbor kid, but she's got exams this week. She can stay a few hours after school, but not all night." He paused. "I can't drive tonight."

"Okay." Curse and blast it. "Not a problem. I'll drive."

"I'm really sorry, Tony. I'd go if I could."

"I know. Don't worry about it." Damn it. I looked at my watch, counted the hours, and calculated that I'd be legal if I left now. "Can you come in later and work the afternoon dock?"

Jacques agreed to return in time for the city drivers, so I left dispatch in Sue Ellen's capable hands and went home to bed.

Dusk had settled by the time I returned. I waved to Jacques as he fueled the highway tractor and headed to dispatch for the travel pouch. As I walked in, Sue Ellen was speaking on the phone.

"Hold on a sec, Rick, he just walked in." She held out the phone. As I took it she pointed to the travel pouch on the desk. "Everything's ready. See you tomorrow."

I tucked the phone under my chin as I leafed through the pouch. "Rick."

"Tony, listen." He sighed. "I hate telling you this . . . Mike Robinson is going to call you tomorrow."

Mike Robinson, Tey's director of operations. I swallowed a moment of awful stillness. "You're pulling out?"

"I went to bat for you, buddy. I tried. But you don't got the volume we need, and now you can't get freight delivered on time."

"I'll turn it around."

"How? Who is going to drive the highway tractor? You? Every night? How are you going to run the company if you can't keep your drivers?"

"I can do it." Somehow.

"It's not me you have to convince, it's Mike. When he calls tomorrow you'd better do some fast talking to prove you're operationally sound. When you bought the company I told the directors that we could rely on you. Don't let me down."

I hung up the phone and walked out into the dock's dark silence. I felt numb, had to concentrate on placing one foot in front of another. I couldn't keep the company afloat without Tey. All the people who worked for me. My parent's house in Toronto, the house I'd grown up in, sold, for nothing.

Something scraped, unseen. I scanned the darkness, hackles raising. Jacques was outside, Sue Ellen and the city drivers long gone.

From inside the highway trailer shone the pale flickering beam of a penlight. Great. Burglars. Tonight of all nights. I crept to the door of the trailer and peered in.

Anton stood wedged between two skids, fingering and prying at the freight. I said sharply, "What are you doing?"

He started, banging his elbow on the skid. "Um, Tony, ah . . . I left my gloves here this morning."

As a lie it was an absolute clunker. We'd stripped the trailer to the boards and reloaded it since this morning. I jerked a thumb over my shoulder. "Out."

He shuffled out, head down. Before I could speak, he asked, "Who's driving tonight?"

"I am."

He blinked, and mumbled, "I'll drive." I stared, speechless. He sweltered under my silence. "I'll drive. I'll go."

I said slowly, "Are you asking for your job back?"

His jaw moved, as if mouthing something foul. He worked the word out. "Yes."

I disliked him. I distrusted him. I didn't want him on my dock, or near my freight, or behind the wheel of my tractor, but I needed him. Heavy vehicle drivers don't grow out of the snow. I couldn't drive myself every night, and I needed Jacques on the dock.

We glared at each other in open hostility, unwillingly connected. I asked, "Why were you late?"

"I was on the phone."

"For an hour and a half?"

He nodded, and I believed him. "All right," I said. "Come back tomorrow night. But no more bullshit, clear?"

"But, tonight . . ."

"No, tomorrow night." If I still had a viable company tomorrow. "This is costing you a day's pay."

"I have to drive tonight."

"Take it or leave it."

He set his jaw, but saw sense and backed down, sullenly. I escorted him out of the building and went outside to break the happy news to Jacques. When I'd explained, Jacques snorted. "We should use him as a wheel chock."

I headed for North Bay, the lights of Quartz River cooling behind me. The headlights shone a path between forest and outcrop, ancient rock scraped bare by glaciers. In the black-gray edge of the headlight's beam, the image of the hand haunted me. I'd never known anyone who'd been murdered, couldn't imagine the hand attached to a living person who'd sat at a desk, drank coffee, or driven home from work. I'd told Sanderos the truth when I'd said I didn't have any enemies. And no one needed to send me a hand to sabotage the company.

Rick's warning gnawed at me. I'd solved part of the problem by rehiring Anton, but the fear of losing Tey's freight hounded me like an arctic wind. I couldn't help feeling that the hand and Tey's threat were somehow connected.

The miles slipped by, my questions rolling over with the wheels. Two and a half hours into the trip, the lights of Englehart appeared, pinpoints in a ribbon of black velvet. On the south side of town I pulled into a truck stop for my en route inspection. Working down the list, I circled the tractor-trailer, checking headlights, turn signals, brake lines. At the rear of the trailer I put up a hand to check that the doors were secure, and stopped.

Why put a hand on a trailer? A message? A warning? And why, if Anton had come to ask for his job back, had he been skulking in the trailer?

I unbolted the trailer doors and climbed inside. Under the flickering yellow light from the truck stop's neon sign, I stood where Anton had stood, searched with fingers rather than eyes. I knew from the manifest that the rear skid held boxed machinery from the gold mine, going for repair in Toronto. I felt the corners through the shrink-wrap, and counted five boxes when there should have been four.

Nothing unusual about that. Shippers often threw in an extra piece. Squinting, I read the labels and found four boxes of mining equipment, and a DVD player.

Knowing that if I was wrong I was setting myself up for a damage claim, I sliced open the shrink-wrap with my penknife and pulled out the DVD player box. The weight felt wrong. Setting the box on the deck, I cut open the sides and literally opened the lid on buried treasure.

Gold. Of course, it had to be gold. As ancient and consuming as greed, as base as human nature.

A clear plastic bag sat in a cushion of foam. Inside the bag, fist-sized chunks of greenish quartz, veined with gold. On the bag's label, a date, time, and series of numbers I took to be a shaft number and depth. An ore sample.

I drove on to North Bay with the DVD box on the passenger seat, and questions growing like brambles. An ore sample had no business on my trailer. The mine shipped its gold by armored vehicle. I had no idea how hard it would be to get an ore sample out of the mine itself, but I reckoned that once packed in an ubiquitous cardboard box, it could lose itself in the anonymity of a ship-ping room.

Someone was using my company to transport stolen gold to a

black market in Toronto. That's why Anton had swallowed his pride to ask for his job back. His partner at the mine must have added the DVD box to the machinery shipment without realizing Anton had been fired. No wonder Anton had gotten worked up about driving tonight. I imagined him sitting in Quartz River, sweating, wondering if I would notice the extra box, and if the gold would make it to its destination.

The implications stretched before me like blue-gray shadows on thin ice. Someone at the end of this road expected the gold. And someone else had lost a hand.

The black and white of forest and snow gave way to the lights of North Bay. I slowed down to city speed, my northern eyes no longer used to multi-lane highways and twenty-four-hour drive throughs. When I pulled into Tey's yard, the night shift greeted me like a barefoot cousin. I grinned along with their hand jokes, hiding my secret and watching for one of them to reveal theirs. If anyone was in a hurry to search the trailer, they didn't show it.

I dropped my trailer, hooked onto the northbound trailer, and headed out with the DVD box on the seat beside me. A box of stolen gold, on my trailer. The mine shipped machine parts three or four times a week. Say each shipment had an ore sample tacked on. Not a hemorrhage, but a slow trickle of gold.

Anton. He'd known, I was certain. But the guy couldn't even tell a good lie. Whatever part he played, he was no criminal mastermind.

The hand. That forlorn pale thing. Every instinct I had told me to take the gold to Sanderos. But if I did, I'd never prove that the crime went beyond my company.

Don't ship with Tony Loft, his company is a pipeline to the black market.

I should take the gold to the police.

But . . . All I knew now implicated my company. Tey had one foot out the door already. To keep them, I needed to be more than the harbinger of bad news.

I drove into darkness. I'd always made the safe choice. My father drove for Tey for thirty years, and when I left high school I drove for them too. When they asked me, I went to work in dispatch. When Rick suggested it, I bought out Lou McEwan.

Time I stopped playing it safe.

Anger fueled me, as raw as petroleum. I'll show them.

When I pulled into the yard in Quartz River, I left the tractor idling in the car park while I transferred the DVD box to the trunk of my car. The gold safe for the moment, I drove around the

side of the building and backed the trailer up to the dock door.

Jacques met me on the dock. "Good trip?"

"Quiet, the best kind. Anything going on here?"

"Nope." He grinned. "Not bad for a change."

We stripped the highway trailer and loaded the city vehicles. As the first light of dawn brushed the trailer's metal flanks with gold, I stretched and thought of bed.

I flagged down Jacques on his tow motor. "I'm done. You'll stay until Sue Ellen gets in?"

He nodded. "No problem."

"Can you be on standby to drive tonight?"

His eyes flickered. "I thought Anton was back tonight."

"He is, but in case he pulls a fast one, I'd like a backup plan."

Jacques agreed. I left dispatch in his hands and headed home. I parked behind the grocery store and carried the DVD box up to the second floor where I lived. My apartment occupied a third of the floor space, partitioned off with drywall. Canned music and clattering shelves drifted up through the floor, the sounds of the store preparing to open. I'd always meant to move somewhere better, one day, so I'd kept my moving boxes stacked five feet from my front door.

Unlocking the door, I put the DVD box on the table and stepped back out to rummage through the boxes. I found the box for my own DVD player and set it on the table beside the one from the trailer. Same brand. Different model, but same size and color box.

I looked at my watch: if I hadn't found the box, it would by now be on a city trailer out on delivery in Toronto. In a few hours, whoever waited for it would know it wasn't coming.

I unplugged my own DVD player and put it in its box, set my alarm for five hours ahead, and went to bed.

At eleven thirty A.M., showered and changed, I drove back to the terminal with both DVD boxes in the trunk of the car. Warily, I checked with Sue Ellen, but Mike Robinson from Tey hadn't yet called. In my office with the door shut, I called the mine and told them we had a problem.

The voice in the shipping room hesitated, and carefully asked, "What sort of problem?"

"Your skid got knocked last night," I explained calmly, with a touch of professional apology. "The shrink-wrap tore and the package on top—a DVD player—came loose and fell."

A long moment passed. "Did the DVD box split open?"

"No, it didn't split, but when I picked it up I could feel the

contents shift, and that can't be right. I have the paperwork for a claim ready. If you like, I'll run it up to you this afternoon."

"No, no. It was broke already, don't worry about it. Just throw it on the southbound trailer tonight."

"Sorry, can't do that. Insurance." A puny lie. I beamed into the phone. "All my trucks are out on delivery, but I have to go up that way myself anyway. I can be there in, say, an hour?"

"It's really not necessary. We won't make a claim on it."

"I still need you to sign off on it." I ladled Toronto attitude into my voice. He'd agree, I hoped, because it was the fastest way to get rid of me.

He sighed. "Fine. I'll be here." He gave me directions and I put down the phone with knotty anticipation.

I told Sue Ellen where I was going and headed out on the highway north to the gold mine. The town slipped away behind me, and within moments I drove in quiet solitude, sharing the road with the occasional fuel tanker.

At the mine, the guard at the gate wrote down my license plate, gave me a pass, and pointed me toward shipping and receiving. I parked where he indicated and went through the door.

Boxes covered every shelf, stood stacked three high in corners. At a desk in the center sat an ordinary-looking man in tidy office clothes. He had the kind of face the eye skips over, half seen, not remembered. Only his eyes, fastening on the DVD box, hinted at hidden depths, like a shadow moving beneath lake ice. He met my gaze with wariness, and I worked at looking bored myself.

Keeping the DVD box tucked under one arm, I stuck out a hand. "Tony Loft. I have your DVD player."

"Good." His gaze flicked to the DVD box, lingered, and skittered away. "Just set it over there."

I handed him the release form. Without reading it, he signed it with a scrawl that would make a doctor proud. He handed back the clipboard. "Thanks for driving it up."

"No problem. I have another customer to visit just up the highway. Do you want to inspect the DVD player now? I could put it on tonight's trailer, if you like."

"No, it'll keep." He looked at his watch and took a step toward the door, herding me. "Sorry, but you've caught me in the middle of something."

"Sure." I half turned to go. "Sorry, I didn't get your name?"

He closed his lips, as if he were working loose a tooth, and finally squeezed out, "Ted."

I drove back to Quartz River with no regard for speed limits. At

the terminal I parked around the side of the building, in the area we used for storage. I took the second DVD box out of the trunk and put it with the claims freight in a separate corner of the dock. Minutes ticked by. In an hour, the dock would be teeming with city drivers unloading their trailers. We'd load the highway trailer, send it out, then lock down the building for the night. If anyone intended to sniff around the bait, they had to come now.

I headed back to dispatch. In my office with the door closed, I phoned the police and got through to Sanders. Reluctantly, she agreed to come out to the terminal.

We kept rock salt and a long-handled ice chipper in the break room to keep glaciers at bay. I spread rock salt over the front parking lot, where it glinted like smoky diamonds. Waiting, I chipped away at the ice patches, and in a few minutes a police cruiser slowed at the laneway and swung into the yard. When Sanders turned as if to pull into a parking spot in front of the office, I ambled over and got in her way.

Sanders wound down her window, letting warm air puff out. I said, "Do you mind parking around the side?" I pointed. "I'm trying to clear this area with rock salt."

She looked at me with a Northerner's exasperated resignation. "Everyone knows rock salt doesn't work below minus twenty. I stood affably unmoving in her path, and I could see her decide that it wasn't worth the effort to explain. She turned the car away with a shake of her head that said clearly: *Torontonians*.

She parked next to my car, in a corner of the yard that couldn't be seen from the road. I stowed the salt and ice chipper and followed.

Sanders asked, "What did you want to show me?"

"Let's go inside." I led her into the building and across the dock to the highway trailer. I walked into the trailer and stood beside a skid. "I was thinking about how someone got the hand onto the trailer. It had to be while the freight was being loaded, but I couldn't see how anyone could do that without the loader noticing. I assume he's not the guy?"

She stared, giving away nothing.

I said, "The hand couldn't have been loaded first, while the trailer was empty, because it would stick out like a sore thumb. So to speak. But no one could just walk into the trailer and leave a hand. Not with the loader right there, and the rest of the dock crew working. Someone would see."

She nodded, following but not overly interested.

I crouched beside the skid. Sanders sighed, and knelt beside me. I said, "Skids are basically two wooden trays, one on top of the

other, held together with four-inch spacers. The forklift's prongs slide into the space. But look—" I took off my glove and slid it into the gap.

Sanderos nodded, her expression lightening. "It was in the skid . . ." She stood, brushing off her knees. "Thank you, Mr. Loft. That is helpful."

"If it was in the skid," I continued, not wanting the conversation to end, "That means it could have been put there hours earlier, anytime during the day."

"It means, too, that your company may not have been the intended target. What was on the trailer that day?"

"Dry goods, some appliances, and two skids of paint for the gold mine."

Out on the dock, the exterior door opened. Boots, hushed voices echoed.

I stepped to the trailer's edge and peered out. Two figures picked through the claims freight. One in heavy coveralls, the other in office jacket and shoes: Anton and Ted.

I called sharply, "Hey!"

My presence didn't alarm them. Anton flicked me a hard stare. "You want something?"

Behind me, Sanderos moved out into the open. Anton went still. The pulse in his neck jumped. Ted, who didn't know Sanderos by sight, laid his hands on the DVD box.

I asked, "What's going on?"

Ted said easily, "You gave me the wrong box. I came to get the right one."

I said to Sanderos, "Ted here runs the shipping room up at the gold mine." I explained about the broken skid and my trip to return the DVD box. "I had another DVD box today. I guess I gave Ted back the wrong one." To Ted I said, "Have you met Detective Sanderos?"

Ted's face seemed to contract, his cheeks receding, his skin graying. He inched his gaze from me to Sanderos, his head turning first, his eyes following.

The box with my DVD player sat on the floor, its lid cut open. I stretched out a hand to take the other box from Ted. "Let me just open this one, to be sure."

Ted took a step back, his fingers digging into the cardboard. "No, no, that's fine."

"No, you signed for the other one. You can't just switch them." I clasped the box and tugged, so that Ted would need to wrench it from my hands to keep it. He looked at me with such naked

despair that if he hadn't brought so much trouble to my door I might have felt sorry for him.

I set the box on a nearby skid and used my penknife to slit open the lid. The ore sample lay in its plastic bag, the gold veins glinting under the dock lights.

Anton took a few stiff-legged steps back. Ted stared at the gold with downcast eyes, as if he couldn't quite bear to face it. Her tone holding only polite interest, Sandersos asked Ted, "This is the box you came for?"

Ted didn't look up, didn't answer. Anton found his voice. "We got nothing to do with it. That's not our box."

"Our box?" Sandersos said. "He's from the mine and you're a truck driver. Why do the two of you have a box?"

Anton sputtered.

Sandersos switched her searchlight gaze back to Ted. "You knew this gold was here?"

He shook his head.

"It might follow that the person who put the gold on the trailer also put the hand there."

Anton gave her a sick look, reached into his coveralls for his cigarettes. Ted swallowed hard, and closed his eyes.

Sandersos studied him. "Who's hand was it?"

Anton jumped, flicked his gaze from side to side as if ready to bolt. Ted shrank into himself, a far-off pain etched into the hollows of his face.

Sandersos said, "We'll find the rest, sooner or later, what's left. This hand—"

"Don't talk about him like that." He exhaled and raised his head, as if settling a decision. "He wasn't just some hand in a morgue."

Sandersos asked quietly, "Who was he?"

"Colm." Ted glanced at Anton. "Colm Kevimaki. He was my cousin."

"And . . . ?"

"We're . . . business partners." He rubbed his forehead. "Ore samples. We shipped ore samples to Toronto and Colm sold them. He worked at the factory that repairs machinery for the mine. He just signed for the gold and walked it out the door in a knapsack."

"How did you sell it?"

"Ted," Anton said despairingly, "*shut up.*"

"Colm knew people," Ted said. "People who knew people."

"How often?" asked Sandersos.

"Two, three times a week." He shot me a look of scorn, which I guess I deserved.

"For how long?"

"Years."

"How much?"

"Two hundred dollars a week."

"Each?"

"Of course each."

Ten thousand dollars a year. Tax free. Small-scale villainy. But a larger predator had caught the scent.

"If it hadn't been for you," Anton turned his fury on me. "If you hadn't come here, he never would've caught us. We had a good thing going, until he muscled in on it."

Sanderos said, "Then what happened?"

Ted said resignedly, "Colm got a phone call. He said he knew, that he'd give us away unless we did what he wanted. The mine. I'd lose my pension. He wanted three times as much ore. It was impossible. We wanted to stop." He glanced at Anton, an old argument reawakened. "I wanted to stop. It was too risky. Colm told him, but he went crazy. He threatened Colm. We didn't believe him."

The truth behind that threat stood starkly between us. Sanderos said, "This man's name?"

Ted shook his head. "I don't know. I don't, really. He phoned Colm with instructions." He looked at the box of ore with loathing. "It wasn't meant to be like this."

Sanderos invited Anton and Ted to her office for a further chat. Once they were out of earshot in the back seat of her car, I said, "This person in Toronto . . ."

"We'll make inquiries at Colm's place of business," Sanderos said.

"Maybe . . . but when Anton said things had gone wrong since I showed up, I don't think he meant since I came here, but since I left Tey. I think their mystery person noticed the pattern because he works for Tey."

Sanderos thought about it. "Then how's he getting the gold? He still needs someone to sign for it at the factory."

"Change the bill to hold for customer pickup. Customers often pick up the freight at the dock themselves, to save delivery charges. All he'd have to do is forge a signature."

"And what? He just walks out with a box of gold under his arm?"

"It's not big," I pointed out. "Briefcase-sized. And . . . I'm probably wrong, but I think I know who." With regret, I told her who, and why.

Early the next morning I opened the office and settled in to wait

for Jacques and the highway trailer. I made coffee and searched the dial for a scratchy all-night radio station, finding peace in safe, boring routine. I had printed a batch of invoices and was contentedly stapling proofs of delivery to the statements when the stapler ran dry. Humming along to a French pop song, I rummaged through Sue Ellen's desk. I had just laid my hand on a box of staples when I heard footsteps behind me.

I turned, expecting Jacques, but the greeting turned to dust in my throat.

Rick. In his hand, a gun.

I looked at the gun. Couldn't look at Rick's face. I stared at the clean black ellipse made by the muzzle, while my thoughts shriveled to Proto-words: no and wait.

Rick said, "You told them."

I had no answer to that, because I had. The Tey dispatcher who'd sent out the mine's freight week after week had been me. I'd never noticed the extra piece. And during my father's last illness, Rick had filled in for me. He'd noticed.

"They came for me. In front of my whole staff. Jed Tey himself was there."

I said nothing.

"I'll lose my job. The house. All because of you."

The absurdity of that statement prodded me to speech. "You sent me here. When Lou wanted to retire, you talked me into buying the company because you knew you could keep fooling me. And you told me Tey wanted to pull out so that I'd rehire Anton. Mike Robinson never called."

"I thought I could rely on you."

"Why aren't you still in custody?"

"Because they're missing a piece. There's one thing they don't know. But you do, don't you?"

He waited, expecting me to know. The answer leapt from me before I could temper it with caution. "The out-of-service trailers." Tey retired its older trailers in a corner of the yard when it became too costly to keep them roadworthy. Rows and rows of trailers. Some would be sold to smaller carriers. Some sat for years.

"You have keys to one," I said. "When you split up with Marcie, you hid your baseball cards in the trailer and told her lawyer you'd sold them for peanuts. I helped you load them." I remembered, clear and sharp, the warm summer evening when we'd hidden the boxes of paper treasure. We'd joked and drunk beer together, abuzz with mischief and friendship.

"RZ116. That's where Colm is." As soon as I'd said it, I wished

on the whole I'd kept my mouth shut. I saw in his face that he wished, in his way, that I hadn't remembered. The past swirled between us, as close and intangible as mist.

Rick raised his gun until I saw the muzzle as a perfect black circle. I said, "My highway driver will be here in a minute."

"Not soon enough."

For a long moment, we stood. Then the skin tightened around his eyes and I realized that he really would shoot me. I whipped the box of staples at his face. He flung up an arm against the tiny shrapnel shower. I charged him, elbows high. I pushed past him, slapped off the lights, and shouldered out the door to the dock.

I ran in darkness. I found a skid by crashing into it, fumbled along the edge to the corner and ducked.

Rick clattered along the wall, searching for the light switch. Indecision paralyzed me. Rick and his gun lay between me and phones and rescuers. In a minute he'd have the lights and I'd be appallingly exposed. Fifty feet away, the dock door stood open, a starry rectangle of velvet in a pool of ink. But even if I could get outside, my car keys sat with my cell phone in my coat pocket, hanging behind my office door. I could run down the lane, but no one would be awake at this hour, and I wouldn't get far in this cold without a coat.

Rick found the light switch. The eye-piercing brilliance jolted me out of my dithering. I strained to hear his careful footsteps, taut breath. He moved from skid to skid. When his footsteps seemed close enough to touch, I broke from a crouch like a sprinter, doubled over, circling the skid so that he had to run around it to get a clear shot.

A deafening crack, and a bullet tore into the floor under my feet. I ran in a wild zigzag for dispatch, through the door into the drivers' break room. Scrabbled at the locker doors. Found the ice chipper.

Rick, in the doorway, the gun rising in his hand. I grasped the ice chipper, but couldn't bring myself to slash at him with the wicked blade. Instead, I swung the wooden handle in an arc like a baseball bat. It connected solidly with his thigh, knocking him white-faced against the wall. I jabbed at his wrists, aiming for the gun, but he grasped the handle and yanked, bringing up his gun hand.

I dropped the ice chipper and ran. Out onto the dock, I ducked through the outside door into the sharp air, and into the path of an avalanche of noise and light.

Searing headlights. Hot, bitter exhaust. Jacques's anguished face. I leapt, knowing it was impossible. The tractor swerved. The wheel

guard clipped my shoulder, sending me sprawling. The great machine shuddered, rocked on its axles. The trailer skewed into a jackknife, skidding sideways like a forty-eight-foot-long scythe. The tail of the trailer scored along the side of the building, raising a storm of screeching metal and sparks.

I lay in the snow, uncrushed. Running footsteps, rough hands. "Tony!"

I pushed myself to my knees. "It's okay. I'm okay."

"You ran right in front of me! Are you crazy?"

I fingered the jagged tears in my woolen sweater where the wheel guard had hit, and knew I'd been lucky. I stood, which turned down Jacques's panic a notch. "Someone was chasing me."

He blinked. "Who?"

"Come on." I fetched the flashlight from the tractor's cab, and with Jacques behind me, circled the trailer. We found Rick where the impact with the trailer had flung him. He lay on his back, eyes open, breathing, but not moving.

Jacques stared at him in blank horror, his eyes pale pools in the dark. "I had to swerve. You ran right out in front of me."

"Jacques, listen to me. It wasn't your fault. If you hadn't swerved, I'd be dead."

He didn't show any sign of hearing, his gaze still fastened on Rick. I said sharply, "Got your cell phone? Call the police, and an ambulance."

He dragged his gaze back to me and nodded. While he phoned, I cast the flashlight around and found the gun half wedged under one of the trailer's wheels.

Jacques folded his phone. "Okay."

"Go into dispatch and get the blankets from the first-aid kit."

He ran. I knelt beside Rick, feeling helpless. Not knowing if he could hear me, I said, "They're coming."

His eyes moved to my face. I gazed down at him in hopeless regret. Too late to wish I'd turned the gold over to Sanderos the night I'd found it. If I had, Rick might now be safe in a cell. I'd wanted to stop playing it safe. Rick had chosen this path himself, but I'd delivered him to its destination. 🦋

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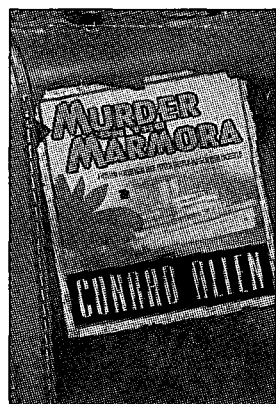
ROBERT C. HAHN

It isn't necessary to use the famed English country house to achieve a setting with a finite number of suspects and victims. Several authors are enjoying success creating the same kind of situation aboard trains or cruise ships or other modes of transportation.

Keith Miles has authored a series of golf mysteries under his own name as well as several historical mystery series under his best known pseudonym, Edward Marston. Writing under the name of Conrad Allen, he has created an entertaining historical series that combines the hothouse atmosphere of a closed company aboard ship with a look at some of the finest cruise ships that plied the oceans.

Conrad Allen's entertaining series features ship's detectives George Porter Dillman and Genevieve Masefield who met in the series debut *Murder on the Lusitania* (1999) when Dillman was a Cunard detective posing as a passenger on the ship's maiden voyage and Masefield was a genuine passenger. By *Murder on the Mauretania* (2000) the two had become detective partners for a job on what was then the world's largest cruise ship. In *Murder on the Minnesota* (2002) the pair hire out as private detectives for a Far East cruise aboard a Great Northern Steamship vessel, before resuming their Cunard duties in *Murder on the Caronia* (2003).

In Allen's latest, Dillman and Masefield move from the glamorous Cunard cruise line down a step to the P&O shipping line in *MURDER ON THE MARMORA* (St. Martin's, \$23.95). Dillman, an American, begins with two strikes against him as the man he reports to, Purser Brian Kilhendry, dislikes Americans and resents having a Cunard man foisted on him. Masefield, an Englishwoman, has her own problems as she plays her role as just another first-class passenger. Allen is adept at creating an entertaining cast of passengers, including aristocrats, nouveaux riches, artists, wealthy businessmen, adventuresses, con men, and stirring and shaking them together aboard the ship until the criminal element strikes and Dillman and Masefield ferret out the answers.



Kilhendry informs Dillman from the get-go that there is no crime aboard his ship, certainly nothing that he can't handle quickly and discreetly. But cabin thefts and even murder will prove the purser wrong and test even the detectives' skills as an arrogant German photographer, a boastful French chef, an ambitious English salesman, and even a former suitor of Masefield provide plenty of suspects. The background information that Allen provides as his series visits some of the world's most interesting ships coupled with entertaining whodunits make this a series to book passage on again and again.

David Roberts, who used a English country house setting to introduce his pair of amateur sleuths, nobleman Edward Corinth and leftist journalist Verity Browne, in 2000 with *Sweet Poison*, moves them easily to a shipboard setting in his newest tale, *DANGEROUS SEA* (Carroll & Graf, \$25). Whereas Conrad Allen's series begins close to the turn of the century (beginning in 1907) and has moved forward slowly, David Roberts began his series with a 1935 murder tale set at the Duke of Mersham's estate. Lord Edward Corinth, the duke's younger brother, and Verity Browne team up in again in *Bones of the Buried* (2001) and *Hollow Crown* (2002), with the aristocratic Corinth and the pretty social activist, who should be natural adversaries, finding mutual attraction and admiration as well.

Dorothy Sayers long ago established the mold, and while almost any author would suffer by the comparison, Roberts manages to give his characters some meaty social issues to gnaw on, such as the Spanish civil war in *Bones* and in *Hollow Crown* the impending abdication of King Edward. In *Dangerous Sea* the issue is Britain's attempt to woo the support of President Roosevelt before the inevitable outbreak of war with Hitler.

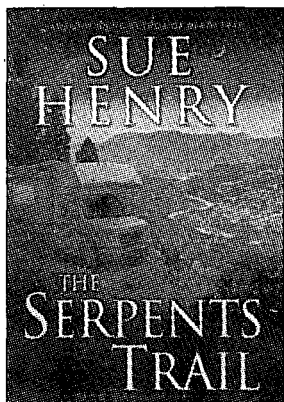
Lord Edward Corinth sails the *Queen Mary* in the spring of 1937 at the behest of Special Branch to serve as extra protection for Lord Benyon who under the cover of delivering a couple of lectures is also to have a secret meeting with Roosevelt when he reaches the U.S. Special Branch has learned the Nazis will do anything to prevent that meeting from succeeding. By chance, Verity Browne is also aboard, sailing with United Mineworkers' representative Sam Forrest, to liaise with communist sympathizers in the States. Among the diverse passengers making the cruise are George Earle Day, a racist southern senator, black actor-singer Warren Fairley and his white wife, actress Jane Barclay, a German Jewish aeronautical engineer, an artist, and a rich art dealer.

Roberts also weaves fascinating details about the *Queen Mary* into his text while mixing in romance as Verity and Corinth continue their seesaw relationship and murder (Benyon is not the

only passenger with a target on his back). The result is an engrossing and enjoyable transatlantic voyage.

Sue Henry, best known for her fine depictions of Alaska and her Jessie Arnold mysteries, has given a former supporting player a starring role and a mobile base of operations in her newest mystery series. While not providing the same closed atmosphere as Allen and Roberts, Henry's clever twist allows her character a rare combination of stability and mobility and will allow her to plausibly explore a variety of settings. Sue Henry struck gold with her 1991 debut mystery, *Murder on the Iditarod Trail*, which won both the Anthony and Macavity awards. Dog trainer Jessie Arnold has since appeared in nine additional mysteries including 2003's *Death Trap*. Henry's vivid depictions of the Alaskan wilderness, particularly notable in such novels as *Cold Company* (2002), where spring is both beautiful and deadly, and in 1998's *Deadfall*, where a memorable island storm proves as dangerous as a stalker, have earned her a solid reputation.

THE SERPENTS TRAIL (New American Library, \$23.95) finds sixty-three-year-old widow Maxie McNabb and her mini-dachshund, Stretch, embarking on a melancholy trip in her Winnebago to visit a dying friend in Grand Junction, Colorado.



Surprises await Maxie, who finds herself deprived of the lengthy visit she expected to have with her friend, Sarah Nunamaker. Sarah is already in the hospital when Maxie arrives: Sarah's home has been burgled and she dies before being able to utter more than a few cryptic words. Maxie is stunned to find herself named as executor rather than

Sarah's son. And an old flame of hers and Sarah's, Ed Norris, reveals some unexpected information about his past with Sarah.

Maxie displays considerable grit and resourcefulness in following a trail blazed by her departed friend, whose penchant for unusual hiding places plays a key role in the story. Maxie's resolve will be familiar to fans of Henry's other sleuth, Jessie Arnold, as she fends off a killer and successfully avenges her friend's death.

Maxie's tricked-out Winnebago gives her a wonderful mobile base of operations and readers will be glad to know that Henry proves every bit as adept and entertaining while describing the beauties of the Colorado National Monument and other vistas as she is her native Alaska.

2004 EDGAR ALLAN POE AWARD WINNERS AND NOMINEES

(Winners are noted in bold face type.)

BEST NOVEL

The Guards by Ken Bruen (St. Martin's Minotaur)

Out by Natsuo Kirino (Kodansha International)

Resurrection Men by Ian Rankin (Little, Brown)

Maisie Dobbs by Jacqueline Winspear (Soho Press)

BEST FIRST NOVEL BY AN AMERICAN AUTHOR

12 Bliss Street by Martha Conway (St. Martin's Minotaur)

Offer of Proof by Robert Heilbrun (William Morrow)

The Night of the Dance by James Hime (St. Martin's Minotaur)

Death of a Nationalist by Rebecca Pawel (Soho Press)

The Bridge of Sighs by Olen Steinhauer (St. Martin's Minotaur)

BEST PAPERBACK ORIGINAL

Cut and Run by Jeff Abbott (Onyx/NAL)

The Last Witness by Joel Goldman (Pinnacle)

Wisdom of the Bones by Christopher Hyde (Onyx/NAL)

Southland by Nina Revoyr (Akashic Books)

Find Me Again by Sylvia Maultash Warsh (Dundurn Group)

BEST SHORT STORY

"Bet on Red" by Jeff Abbott (*High Stakes*, Signet/NAL)

"Black Heart & Cabin Girl" by Shelly Costa (*Blood on Their Hands*, Berkley Prime Crime)

"Aces and Eights" by David Edgerley Gates (AHMM/December 2003)

"The Maids" by G. Miki Hayden (*Blood on Their Hands*)

"Cowboy Grace" by Kristine Kathryn Rusch (*The Silver Gryphon*, Golden Gryphon Press)

BEST MOTION PICTURE SCREENPLAY

The Cooler, screenplay by Wayne Kramer & Frank Hannah
(Content Film, Lions Gate Films)

Dirty Pretty Things, screenplay by Steve Knight
(BBC, Celador Productions, Jonescompany)

Monster, screenplay by Patty Jenkins (MDP Worldwide)

Mystic River, screenplay by Brian Koppelman, based on the novel by
Dennis Lehane (Malpaso Productions)

Runaway Jury, screenplay by Brian Koppelman, David Levien, Rick
Cleveland, Matthew Chapman, based on the novel by John Grisham
(New Regency Pictures, 20th Century-Fox)

ROBERT L. FISH MEMORIAL AWARD FOR BEST FIRST MYSTERY STORY

"The Grass is Always Greener" by Sandy Balzo (EQMM/March 2003)

For a complete listing of all the Edgar Award categories, winners,
and nominees, go to www.mysterywriters.org.

THE FRANKLIN FIASCO

BEVERLE GRAVES MYERS

I saw the man again today. He was a stout, thin-lipped *Inglese* with a stringy mop of gray hair falling from a high forehead unencumbered by wig or tricorne. Folded over the side of a hired gondola, the seat of his broadcloth breeches waving in the air, he had almost submerged his nose in the gray-green water of the canal. Today he was studying the foundation stones of a warehouse across from Sperazzi's coffeehouse, my unofficial place of business. Yesterday, I'd spotted him on the Grand Canal at the base of the Rialto Bridge, and a few days before he'd been on the Piazza asking questions about the San Marco bell tower.

I took a sip of Sperazzi's pungent brew and bowed to an acquaintance, who hurried by with a cheery, "Ciao, Nicco."

I was at liberty. Employment had been scarce since the wealthy patricians had retreated to their mainland villas on the cool banks of the River Brenta. Of those obliged to summer in Venice, the shipyard's carpenters and caulkers tended to resolve problems with their fists, sailors favored a dagger in the ribs, and the genteel clerks and shopkeepers couldn't rise to my fees. I would soon be reduced to haunting the *Quarantia Criminale* to scrape work chasing down accused felons.

To stave off that unhappy task, I looked idly around for the old man's keeper. I believed that the *Inglese* inspecting the mossy stones of the warehouse must be crazy—either addled by age or pox-demented. Any sensible man would keep his nose well away from floating filth in mid July. But no one on the square or the arched bridge at the end of the narrow canal seemed to pay him any attention. His boatman was sculling his oar, struggling to keep the gondola still enough to allow the old man to take measurements with a pair of large brass calipers and record them in a leatherbound folio. The only other boat nearby was a two-man barge hauling cabbages toward the Rialto markets.

Suddenly, a sleek black gondola shot out from under the bridge. Its boatmen, fore and aft, had their caps pulled low and its two

bulky passengers were masked. That was odd in itself. The entire city went masked during Carnival, but that festival was months away. I pushed my cup aside and strode to the edge of the stones overhanging the canal.

The slender length of the approaching gondola bore no shield of its owner's arms, but it was clearly not a boat for hire. I saw no scratches on its polished flanks, and its leather seats positively glowed in the morning sunshine. It skimmed over the flat surface of the sluggish canal, cutting to the left to avoid the lumbering cabbage barge. At first, I thought the rowers must have misjudged the current as they swung past the barge's stern. Then I saw their true intent.

Like a rearing sea monster on old mariners' maps, the gondola's notched prow bore straight toward the old *Inglese*. The man himself seemed oblivious. He kept his nose to his journal, scribbling notes.

I yelled a warning, and other coffee drinkers ran to join me. Sperazzi left his roasting beans, stripped off his voluminous apron, and waved it in frantic circles. Our imprecations fell on deaf ears. The gondoliers rowed faster, and their masked passengers produced wickedlooking boat hooks. The *Inglese's* boatman pulled frantically at his oar, but he was pinned in by a delivery landing.

Wood splintered and cracked as the metal teeth at the prow of the ramming boat found their target. The terrified boatman leapt from the

Like a rearing sea monster, the gondola's notched prow bore straight toward the old *Inglese*.

sinking boards to a mooring post which he embraced as tightly as a libertine wooing a virgin fresh from the convent. The old man had disappeared. I watched in horror as the masked bravos beat the floating wreckage with their iron-tipped boat hooks.

Like all Venetian boys, I'd learned to swim as soon as I could walk. In a city of a hundred watery thoroughfares, a father would be reprehensibly negligent to ignore this part of a son's education. I threw off my jacket and waistcoat, tossed my best (and only) wig to Sperazzi, and dove into the canal.

The brackish water stung my eyes, but I forced them open to search for a limp body. A pair of stout legs encased in white stockings kicked in the murk toward the center of the canal. Avoiding the churning water under the assault of the boat hooks, I surfaced to snatch a breath. The *Inglese* had managed to keep his head above water and was making frantic grabs at the leather journal which was floating among the debris of the broken gondola.

Over the splashing and yelling, I heard the whistles of the *sbirri*. The masked assailants heard the constables too. They retracted their boat hooks and ordered the rowers to get going. I swam toward the old man, away from the gondola's path, but not fast enough. By accident or design, an oar struck the side of my head. Sputtering and struggling, I caught it in my grasp and gave a mighty tug. A rewarding splash told me I'd bagged one of the rowers, but his fellow took swift revenge. The second oar descended in a vicious arc. A flash of lightning tore through my brain as I sank like a brick.

I awoke with hard, hot stones scraping my cheek and something blunt and bony pressing into my back. It was the old man's knee. The *Inglese* that I had believed to be as helpless as a girl had pulled me from the canal and was expertly expelling water from my lungs. Sperazzi and his patrons crowded around us.

With a watery cough, I sat up and searched my limited store of English for the proper words. "I am Nicco Ziani, sir, and I am in your debt. I think to save you from drowning, yet you rescue me. You must be a powerful swimmer."

A thin trail of blood dribbled from a cut on his cheek, but the old man threw back his head and gave a hearty laugh. "That was nothing. When I was your age I swam the Thames from Chelsea to Blackfriars whenever the opportunity presented."

"Ah, I was right. You are English."

"Not at all, good sir." He pulled his chin to his chest and fixed me with a solemn gaze. "I am an American, from Philadelphia. When I swam the Thames, I was living in London as a printer. But over the years England has become my enemy. Now I'm living in France, trying to convince King Louis's ministers to part with enough money to keep America's soldiers in boots this winter."

He rose to his feet and pulled me up with an amazingly strong grip. "My name is Ben Franklin."

Interesting—I'd been following the tale of this fellow's rebellious colonies in the gazettes. No one believed that the Americans' ragtag army could possibly prevail, but admiring their bid for freedom felt a bit like putting flowers on my father's grave. If Carlo Ziani hadn't died with a tyrant's boot on his neck, I wouldn't be haunting Sperazzi's coffeehouse today.

But this beaming American had mentioned France. I wondered what he was doing in Venice. He'd never wheedle any money from the doge and his council. My government existed on the remembered glories of her empire days when the Republic of Venice ruled

the sea and all the trade on it. Any reminder that the world was changing would be most unwelcome.

That unspoken question was answered by a man I had only just noticed. He had lived perhaps fifty years but was trying to erase the last twenty with a layer of powder on his sunken cheeks and dots of cherry red on his withered lips. The cut of his expensive, sky-blue coat announced that he was French before he opened his mouth.

"Doctor Franklin is visiting Venice as a scientist." He spoke school-room Italian in loud, slow syllables as if instructing an unlettered peasant. "I, Laurent Dupin, invited our American friend to accompany our group from *L'Academie des Sciences*. We are touring Italy to study electric currents." He paused to dab a handkerchief to his perspiring cheeks. It came away smudged with rouge. "Doctor Franklin is an acknowledged expert on the subject. His great intellect humbles us all, but I have also published several papers on electrical conductors that enjoy some fame in scientific circles. Our next stop is Bologna, to see Doctor Galvani's marvelous experiments, but if these accidents keep occurring, we might better return to Paris."

"That was no accident," I replied in impeccable French. "I saw the whole thing. That gondola rammed Signor Franklin's on purpose."

"Surely not!" the Frenchman cried. "Who would dare?"

Franklin clutched his soggy notebook to his chest. "Laurent, we must face facts. Those bravos were out for blood. It was the same with the falling roof tile that narrowly missed my head last night. And then there was the food poisoning I suffered at dinner three days ago. I blamed that on underdone fowl and the roof tile on a stray cat, but I begin to see a cunning hand at work."

"*Mon Dieu!* We must call in the authorities. Those constables who removed that half-drowned boatman, we must call them back."

Franklin shook his head. "The Venetian constables don't exactly inspire confidence. They seem more fit for stage buffoonery than criminal investigation. No . . . if Signor Sperazzi's tales of *this* man's exploits are even half true, the remedy we seek stands before us."

I raised my eyebrows as the American pointed directly at my chest. "I am at your service, Signor Franklin," I offered quickly. "But what is it that you wish me to do?"

For the first time I saw a look of fear and uncertainty come into the American's eyes. "It's very simple," he answered. "I want you to keep me alive."

Some men would have locked themselves in their chambers and pulled the bedcovers over their heads, but not Ben Franklin. Over the next few days, this insatiably curious American led me down every

canal and alley in Venice. My city is known for its printers and book-sellers, and despite the threats to his safety, the American wanted to visit every one. Apparently, my new employer had begun his career as a printer and, before he turned to statecraft, produced a yearly almanac devoted to weather lore and wise maxims. He did not, however, ignore the scientific pursuits which had brought him to Italy.

One memorable afternoon, the tireless scientist dragged me up the endless ramp that crisscrossed the interior shaft of San Marco's bell tower. As on most of our jaunts, it was only the two of us. Laurent Dupin and his colleagues seemed to prefer studying library texts to open-air observation. By the time Franklin and I reached the top of the massive tower, my shirt was dripping with sweat, but at least we found a pleasant breeze blowing through the summit arcade. While my employer observed and measured, I scanned the baking rooftops below. I saw nothing suspicious, but then, I really didn't expect to.

The boatman I'd dunked in the canal had been thoroughly questioned. He was one of those ruffians who dawdle on the Rialto, waiting for any work that might pop up. The masked bravos had hired him for an hour's rowing; he had no idea who the gondola actually belonged to. Not much help, but yet I began to form an image of Franklin's antagonist: a rich man, certainly, to afford sleek gondolas and hired thugs; cautious in the way of a man unused to violence, so cautious that his murderous attempts had so far fizzled out like a damp candlewick; and growing more desperate as Franklin's time in Venice waned. The attacks had begun soon after the French delegation arrived, and the scientists would set out for Bologna three days hence. If I were the man who wanted Franklin dead, I'd carry out the next attempt myself, at close range, leaving nothing to chance.

I had followed Franklin unquestioningly in all of his pursuits, but drew the line when he pointed from our perch on the bell tower across the sun-kissed lagoon to the island of San Giorgio Maggiore. "Can you row that far, Nicco? I'd like to study that church's foundation."

"Not a good idea, signore. I can't serve as your bodyguard and gondolier at the same time, and you've seen that it's unwise to trust a hired boatman."

Franklin acquiesced with a short nod. "That's all right, I've collected enough measurements to prove my theory."

I questioned him with a raised eyebrow.

"Your city is sinking, Nicco."

What? I lowered my gaze to the Piazza. In one glance, I took in a

thousand years' worth of architectural splendor: the doge's palace of pink Verona marble, the graceful columns bearing our patron saints, and the shimmering domes and spires of the basilica. The Piazza San Marco was the very heart of Venice, and my industrious ancestors had built it to beat throughout eternity.

"What you say is impossible, Signor Franklin," I shot back. "The piles that support Venice were driven into solid clay at the bottom of the lagoon. The building foundations are of the hardest Istrian stone."

"The piles may last, and the stones too. The problem is what holds them together. Every time the tide washes in and out, a little mortar goes with it. And very gradually, the tides are rising. Time and tide are your enemies, Nicco, just as surely as King George's troops are mine. If the trend continues," he said pointedly, "all of Venice will be underwater someday."

I felt an angry flush climb to my cheeks. Venice destroyed? Sunk beneath the waves like the mythical city of Atlantis? How dare this emissary from an infant country predict such a fate for my illustrious homeland!

"Ah, I fear I've upset you." Franklin gave me an apologetic glance. "Sometimes my plain speaking offends, but what's true is nevertheless true. I can only hope that the scientists of the future are able to devise a gigantic baffle to reduce the water intake at the inlets of the Lido. My understanding of tides isn't equal to that task, but there is one thing I can do for Venice today."

"What is that?" I asked between gritted teeth.

"I can protect all these buildings and the people within them from a more immediate enemy." His outspread arms took in the entire Piazza. "Can you imagine what would happen if this bell tower crumpled under a powerful lightning strike?"

"It would be utter devastation!"

"Exactly. But if I can persuade your government to let me place one of my lightning rods on this tower, your beautiful Piazza may survive until that clever scientist of the future designs a dam for the lagoon."

"How does it work, this lightning rod?"

He was grinning now. "Do you understand that the lightning that crackles in the sky is an electrical discharge? Or do you share the church's belief that a diabolical agency produces the phenomenon to threaten and punish mankind?"

"Don't think me a fool. Perhaps I haven't mentioned that I spent several years at the University of Padua before my family's fortunes declined."

"Very well, then. It's really quite simple. Lightning is a giant spark

that passes between oppositely charged clouds or between the clouds and the earth. A long, pointed iron rod that is affixed to the top of a structure that is grounded in the earth can neutralize the charges before they build up enough strength to do any damage."

I nodded. "You've used these rods before?"

"Of course; as soon as I'd put the concept to practical application, I put one on my own house. Now every important building from Boston to Philadelphia sports one of my rods."

"Have you broached the subject with the doge's council?"

"Ah, there's the problem. Old ways die hard." We had started down the ramp. Franklin's steps slowed and his shoulders bowed. "I should be accustomed to opposition by now. In Boston, the pastor of the Old South Church actually blamed my rods for causing the Massachusetts earthquake of 1755. 'There's no escaping heaven's wrath,' he said. But I've never run into such recalcitrant superstition as that displayed by the Bishop of San Marco."

I nodded, remembering the bishop's fiery sermons from my youth. As a young man bent on the pursuit of pleasure, my nightmares had featured Bishop LoRocco's glittering dark eyes in his pale, lean face, describing the hellish tortures that awaited the souls of the damned. I said, "Bishop LoRocco would as soon ride a goat up the stairs of the basilica as let a scientific instrument be installed on his bell tower."

"Exactly," Franklin replied. "He reminded the council that this tower was protected by the golden angel topping its spire and by the ringing of the consecrated bells within. Then he had them shivering in their shoes imagining God's displeasure if Venice were to trust my 'heretic's rod' over those holy talismans."

"And yet, everyone knows the tower has suffered a few mild lightning strikes in its time. What does Bishop LoRocco have to say to that?"

"Signs and signals, of course. According to the good bishop, God sometimes allows the malignant powers of the air to threaten Venice as a sign for your dissolute city to mend her ways." My companion lowered his voice into an unsettling imitation of the bishop's sonorous bass. "It would be unbridled impiety to seek to deflect God's scouring artillery."

His words seemed to bounce off the masonry and linger in the air as we tacked back and forth to descend the ramp. "Have you no supporters on the council?" I asked.

"A few. The senator who is hosting our delegation, Signor Marcantonio Gandolfo, has spoken in support of my project. You will meet him at tonight's reception." Franklin stopped on the loggia at the

base of the bell tower and shaded his eyes against the bright sunlight. "Or perhaps you already know Senator Gandolfo?"

"Only by repute." I caught the American watching my expression from under his shading hand. Did he expect that I'd be impressed by the mention of the Gandolfo name? Intimidated, perhaps? Not likely. Despite his prideful ways, Marcantonio Gandolfo was the scion of a family that had bought its way into the nobility only a century ago. While the Gandolfi had been selling sugar from market barrows, the Ziani had produced generals, explorers, ambassadors, and one doge.

I replied evenly, "You are fortunate to have found such a prominent host. Most of the patricians are away on the mainland, enjoying their summer villas."

"Yes, we have been entertained most generously. Senator Gandolfo told us he never goes to the mainland, as affairs of state require his constant presence."

I struggled to contain a smirk. The current doge was a very old man, and Gandolfo had been drooling over his office for years. The nobleman was always on the lookout for allies who would back him in the inevitable election. Franklin's ambitious host wouldn't leave the city as long as there was one stalk of political hay to be harvested.

The American continued, "Senator Gandolfo has been kind enough to offer the grand salon of his palazzo for me to conduct a demonstration that should put the council's doubts about my lightning rod to rest."

"Then what have you been waiting for? You and the French scientists will be leaving soon."

"What I'm waiting for," Franklin replied, squinting up at the cloudless sky, "is a thunderstorm."

Casa Gandolfo rose from the water at the westward bend of the Grand Canal. I arrived at the first moment of twilight, before the torches flanking the arched portico had been lit or the banners flying from the second floor balcony had been lowered. A waning moon hung in a blue velvet sky, and the evening haze blurred the edges of the pale sandstone palazzo, giving it the look of a ghost house rising from an enchanted sea. I passed by the magnificently carved doors at the front portico and searched out the kitchen wing.

According to his democratic principles, Franklin had wanted me to attend the reception as one of Senator Gandolfo's guests, but I begged him to let me mingle with the servants instead. I didn't want my powers of observation diluted with small talk. Besides, if you

really want to know what goes on in a grand house, you head for the servants' domain.

Gandolfo's majordomo, a plump, liveried rodent called Renato, had been advised of my duties.

"Go wherever you like," he told me in a squeaky voice. "Just don't get in the way of the footmen carrying trays up from the kitchen. They're clumsy footed boys at best."

"Are any of them strangers? Hired for the night?"

"Certainly not! The master insists on maintaining adequate staff." Renato's squeak tightened. "You won't find any of us harming Signor Franklin. It's been a pleasure to serve him. He never has his nose in the air like our French guests—never fails to inquire after my wife. She's been taken poorly ever since our son set off for America. Always thought he'd follow me into service, but the lure of a new country . . ."

I left Renato spouting his worries to the walls and mounted the stairs to the second floor to locate the grand salon. Footmen were lighting the candles that wreathed the marble columns, and the musicians who would provide background music were tuning their instruments on the dais. I asked them enough questions to satisfy myself that assassins hadn't infiltrated the violinists, then melted into the shadows to await the first guests.

Franklin sent me a wink as he joined Senator Gandolfo and his statuesque wife at the head of the reception line. An odd mixture of threadbare patricians, solemn intellectuals, and elegant foreigners were waiting at the arched entryway. Before Renato could announce the first party, an angular fellow wearing a slack grin and holding a glass of wine jostled my elbow. I recognized one of the French delegation. By the looks of his crooked wig and stained waistcoat, I surmised that the glass he carried was not his first.

"You're that bodyguard fellow . . . looking after the old conjuror." He tapped the side of his nose and put his face so close to mine that I could smell his grape-soaked breath. "Tell me. If Franklin's so smart, what does he need you for? Why doesn't he just deduce who's been trying to shorten his life?"

"Smart he may be, but he doesn't have eyes in the back of his head," I whispered sharply. "What's it to you, anyway? Do you have something against Signor Franklin?"

"Not me! I wouldn't risk the gibbet to get rid of my worst enemy. Still, it's not fair, that." He nodded toward the receiving line. "You don't see any of us lined up for the welcome. Just the American, as if he discovered electricity single handedly. Our Dupin has published more papers on the subject than Doctor Franklin, and we all

know Dupin's knob-headed rods work better than Franklin's pointed ones. But who gets the glory, eh? The man with the witty banter and the bag of tricks."

As the fellow staggered off, I made a mental note to watch Dupin more closely. It hadn't struck me that professional jealousy could be a compelling motive for the murderous attacks, but then I wasn't a scientist whose reputation hung on the balance of public acclaim.

I turned my attention back to the receiving line. The scruffy Venetians had been greeted and were making a beeline for the food tables. I knew they must be *Barnabotti*, impoverished nobles who retained their voting rights on the Great Council but had long since been forced to sell their palazzi and mainland estates. Gandolfo had given them all an exquisitely correct bow, but his lady had greeted them with ill-disguised condescension.

Franklin had beamed on all of the guests in their turn, excepting one pair of richly dressed, whey-faced foreigners. To them, the American had kept his lips in a thin, frosty line and sketched the barest of bows.

Who were they? I'd missed their names listening to the drunken scientist, so I edged around the tapestried walls of the immense salon, keeping the couple in view, straining to catch a wisp of conversation. It was no use. They took glasses from a silver tray proffered by a footman, then strolled to the musicians' dais where the tinkling of the harpsichord made eavesdropping impossible.

I snagged the footman's arm. "Who is that man in the coat of plum brocade escorting the woman with the pearl-studded wig?"

The boy tried to pull away, but pressure applied to the sensitive nerve that looped around his elbow gained me a quick response. "That's Lord Claibourne, the British ambassador."

I stood astonished. England's envoy to Venice invited to a reception to meet America's most prominent representative in Europe? I tightened my grip on my informant. "Are you sure?"

"Si, si." The glasses on his tray began to quiver. "Please, signore. I am sure of it. Lord and Lady Claibourne are often here."

I continued to prowl the perimeter of the salon, always keeping Franklin's simple chestnut-colored jacket at the periphery of my gaze. Once I started to his side when one of the *Barnabotti* approached my employer with his hand secreted in his waistband. I relaxed when I saw the man wasn't reaching for a weapon, but only a paper on which he had penned a sonnet in praise of Franklin's accomplishments.

The American listened to the flowery tribute with a humble smile, but before he could voice his thanks, another's rumbling

tones rose above the chatter and clinking of glass and porcelain.

"Your praise is misplaced, signore. Doctor Franklin has achieved much, but his philosophy of raising iron rods to draw lightning from the clouds presumes upon heaven itself."

I hadn't been to Mass in donkey's years, but I would never forget that voice. It was Bishop LoRocco's personal rendition of God speaking to Moses from the mountain—unctuous, precise, reeking with righteousness. It had never failed to set my teeth on edge.

Franklin drew himself up as the crowd parted to reveal the bishop—a lean, awkward giant with skin so marble smooth I might have assumed he was a castrato if his voice hadn't been so deep. He towered over the astonished American and waved a cassocked arm toward our host.

"You must forgive me, Gandolfo. Like a prophet of old, I come uninvited."

The senator trotted over, sweat running from under his powdered wig and soaking his lace-trimmed neckband. I was sure of that much; I was right behind him.

"Your Excellency, you know you are always welcome in my home." Gandolfo attempted a light, indulgent tone. "But I thought we had agreed to confine this discussion to council chambers."

"A matter of this import cannot be confined." LoRocco looked down his long nose at Franklin as if the American were a mayfly swimming in the punch bowl. Then he raised his arms and his voice rang out. "Hear me, fellow Venetians and council members. The souls of everyone in our city are imperiled by the presumption of this one dangerous—devilishly dangerous—man. His rod on the tower would be like a slap to the very face of God. It must not be allowed."

The musicians' minuet petered out, and a crowd formed around our little group. Only Lord and Lady Claibourne remained aloof.

Franklin was unperturbed. He crossed his hands over his rotund belly and raised his chin. "And I say," he answered calmly but forcibly, "that even a beast knows to shelter itself from the driving rain and freezing snow. As men of intellect, shouldn't we use our God-given talents to do more? Isn't it our duty to protect ourselves and our families against the effects of lightning just as we do against rain, wind, and snow?"

Many of the assembled company nodded: *Barnabotti*, intellectuals, and scientists alike. LoRocco's face turned a dull brick red.

"Don't listen to him." The angry bishop whirled in a circle, his black robes billowing a gust of hot air. "Who is this Franklin anyway? He calls himself a man of intellect, but he's really just a beggar come to solicit money for his rebel troops. He doesn't care about

Venice. Let the priests protect you—we'll ring the sacred bells to rout the demons of the air. Isn't our mightiest bell inscribed with this charge:

On the Devil my spite I'll vent,
And with God's help thunderbolts prevent?"

The bishop's seething rant drew a variety of concordant nods, incredulous stares, and nervous titters. Franklin opened his mouth to speak, but Laurent Dupin cried, "*Non, mais non,*" and disengaged himself from the knot of French scientists. In contrast to the high, curled wig that made him look like an aging dandy in a Goldoni comedy, the Frenchman struck a belligerent pose.

"What about the hundreds of bellringers who've been electrocuted in thunderstorms in every country of Europe?" He poked a beringed forefinger in the bishop's chest. "And what about the widows and orphans they've left behind? Do your prayers fill their hungry bellies? The question is not whether churches should be protected by lightning rods, but . . ." He took a deep breath and shot Franklin a challenging look. "But which design works best, my knobbed or Franklin's pointed?"

Senator Gandolfo was sweating bullets now. The air in the huge salon had gone stuffy, and the party atmosphere had suddenly changed to one of menace. Moving closer to Franklin, I cast a quick glance around the circle of bodies pressed around us. Dupin's colleagues were pounding him on the back and chattering away in their native tongue, the other guests had started arguing among themselves, and Venice's leading churchman was glaring fiercely on all concerned.

Bobbing to my tiptoes to look for the British ambassador, I saw him heading for the door with a gloating look on his face, obviously pleased at the dissension within the French-American ranks. Behind my left shoulder, the babble of voices rose in intensity and someone started a shoving match.

I pressed my mouth to Franklin's ear. "Stay close," I whispered as I reached for my dagger. Its silver hilt burned hot and oily in my palm.

I meant to guide the American through the increasingly raucous crowd, but Ben Franklin was not a man to be led. He whipped around me and pushed his way to the dais. Once there, he clapped his hands for quiet, and the Venetians, who were capable of arguing for hours once they got rolling, amazed me by giving Franklin their full attention.

The sturdy American pulled a booklet from a deep pocket of his jacket and held it up for all to see. It was an almanac with the four

winds depicted on its tattered paper cover.

"I bought this wonderful book from a dealer on the Mercerie," he announced. "It's taught me a good deal about the weather patterns here in Venice." He leaned forward. "Would you say that this July has been uncommonly hot and dry?"

Franklin searched his audience's faces and was rewarded with many knowing nods.

"And when such a heat wave breaks, Venice generally suffers a stupendous thunderstorm. Is it not so?"

More nods.

"Friends," he exclaimed. "Within forty-eight hours, I predict a storm that will lace the sky with electric fire. With Senator Gandolfo's permission, I will harness this fire to demonstrate the efficacy of my lightning rod beyond a shadow of a doubt." Franklin paused and the crowd awaited his next words in a fever of anticipation. Even the French appeared interested. Only the bishop displayed a malevolent frown. Franklin spread his arms, wide and welcoming. "Assemble back here at the first rumble of thunder, good people, and prepare to be amazed."

Franklin kept me busy most of the next day. An ironmonger had already forged and installed a nine-foot rod (pointed, of course) on the highest point of Gandolfo's tiled roof, but the rod was only the collection point for the electrical charge. The electricity would travel through a wire the thickness of a goose quill that was insulated by lengths of glass tubing. Franklin had me attach this conduit to the foot of the iron rod and run it through attics and down staircases to attach to a model of the bell tower. This miniature tower had been fashioned of mahogany and papier-mâché and was about the size of a tall riding boot. It graced the dais where the musicians had played the night before.

As I understood it, metal traces would show the path of the lightning through the model bell tower, and when the grounding circuit was broken, a small bit of gunpowder would ignite and cause the roof to fly off and the walls to explode. Franklin said it made quite a show in a darkened room and never failed to impress either friends or critics.

When all was in readiness, I begged Franklin's leave to run an errand of my own. I couldn't get Bishop LoRocco out of my mind. There were several who took issue with my genial employer, but LoRocco's twisted fury seemed to overshadow any political or scientific disagreements. Franklin threatened everything that the clergyman believed, and LoRocco clearly hated him for it. I was

determined to save Franklin from the bishop's wrath, but I needed to be fully armed.

It was late afternoon when I turned off the Mercerie into the alley of gunsmiths. A few hungry weeks earlier, I had left my pistol there in pawn. Now I could use Franklin's generous wages to reclaim it. As I was entering the shop, my gaze lit on a familiar figure scurrying along under the eaves, which almost met over the narrow pavement. I wondered what was in the package tucked under his arm, but I was in a hurry and let Gandolfo's majordomo pass without comment.

When I stepped back out into the open, I knew I had to hurry. The air felt close and damp, and purple thunderclouds were building against a dun-colored sky. The first raindrops hit as I was mounting the steps at Casa Gandolfo.

I found the salon in a whirl of activity. Franklin was fussing with the wires on his model bell tower; the old man's cheeks were flushed with excitement, like a child with a new toy. Renato was supervising the laying of the refreshment table and the footmen had almost finished setting up a host of spindly gilt chairs in a semicircle around the dais. Then Gandolfo passed through and ordered them to move the chairs back another few feet. He nodded to me and said, "My wife is worried enough as it is. She fears we'll all be electrocuted or blown sky high."

Franklin chuckled when he heard that remark. "Perfectly safe, Senator. All perfectly controlled."

Thunder rumbled aloft like the roar of distant cannon fire. A footman shook like he was ready to bolt, but Renato gave him a cold eye and preparations continued.

Council members soon appeared at the archway, then Lord and Lady Claibourne. The ladies shook water droplets from their wide skirts while the men chatted and offered snuffboxes around. Drumming a steady beat on the canal outside, the rain sheeted the panes of the long windows and dimmed the salon to a cavern of smoke-gray shadows.

From the guest quarters, the French delegation marched in with Laurent Dupin in the lead. He jumped when a splitting clap of thunder exploded directly over the palazzo, but Dupin's surprise quickly turned to envy when Franklin mounted the dais and began to instruct his adoring but anxious audience on what they were about to see.

I listened from my post at the entryway, waiting for the one I knew would come no matter how much he hated scientific demonstrations. My recovered pistol made a comforting bulge in my waistcoat pocket.

The sky was bursting with volleys of thunder now, and the water-streaked windows rattled with every boom. Franklin announced that we didn't have long to wait.

My quarry finally slunk through the door as lightning crackled and an eerie, bluish light filled the room. LoRocco stared at the dais with an expression of loathing twisting his long, sallow face, then started toward Franklin. I followed. The pair of us hugged the wall like creeping shadows.

An odd buzzing sound drew my gaze from LoRocco's black figure to the dais. Fueled by a flow of electricity from the rod on the rooftop, the model bell tower sparkled with threads of cool fire. Several men jumped from their seats and one woman screamed, but Franklin calmed them with his mellow voice. "No cause for alarm. The tower is safe as long as the lightning's power can discharge into the ground."

At the windows, forks of heavenly fire flashed again and again. They made a flickering blue mask of LoRocco's sneering face as he continued to edge toward the dais. I mirrored his steps until Renato bumped across my path.

"Out of the way," I whispered. I gave his shoulder a shove, and felt the hair on my neck rise. My forehead tingled, but with a surfacing memory, not electric current.

"Wait." I dug my fingers into his jacket and pulled him back. "I saw you in the gunsmiths' alley today. What were you doing?"

His pointed nose twitched, and his eyes darted toward Gandolfo, who was sitting with the British ambassador. "Only fetching supplies for my master."

Not slackening my grip on Renato, I glanced at the dais. LoRocco had almost reached Franklin, but the American didn't see him. Franklin was explaining how he would break the grounding circuit and allow the next lightning strike to pop the roof off the little tower.

"Signor Gandolfo's going boar hunting next week," the majordomo squeaked, "after the scientists leave."

I went as rigid as the iron rod on the roof.

After one paralyzed second, I shoved Renato aside and sprinted for the dais. I passed LoRocco like he was a marble statue—the bishop didn't matter anymore. I had to stop Franklin.

There hadn't been any wild boar in Venice since her first piles were pounded into the mud. And Gandolfo never visited the mainland. Renato hadn't gone after hunting supplies for his master; he'd been buying gunpowder, and I'd just realized where he'd stashed it.

Franklin had his hand to the grounding wire when I crashed onto the dais and knocked him to the floor. As we both went sprawling, I rolled him as far away from the platform as I could.

Franklin moaned and the salon erupted in shocked gasps.

Unheeding, I leapt back onto the dais, tore the wires from the tower, and broke the model over my knee. An opportune flash of lightning let everyone see the stream of gunpowder I poured from the two halves of the broken tower. It was ten times the amount that Franklin had placed in the model, enough to have blown the American, and probably several others, to bits.

Gandolfo was helping a dazed Franklin rise to his feet. "But who?" the nobleman cried. "Why?"

I didn't need to speak. Renato's flight proclaimed his guilt.

Two footmen at the archway pinned the little man by the arms while the furious majordomo squealed like a rat in a trap. "American patriots! I hate every one of them. If they hadn't inflamed my Tonio with a lust for freedom, my son would never have emigrated to America. He'd have stayed here in Venice where he belongs. Now Tonio's gone and we'll never see him again." Renato spat in Franklin's direction. "Americans! Bah! Death to you all!"

Laurent Dupin was scratching his head. "Renato was behind the attacks? A servant? But how could he afford to hire the gondola that almost drowned Signor Franklin?"

Renato had turned quiet and sullen, but Gandolfo was nodding his head. "Renato is in charge of the household funds. I think a full accounting is past due." The nobleman swung his arm in a dismissive gesture. "Lock him up until we can notify the constables."

The footmen marched Renato down the hall, but the majordomo managed to twist from their grasp and run crashing through a pair of rain-swept doors. I was right behind him as he launched himself onto the balcony that spanned the front of the palazzo. I grabbed at his coattails, but my feet slipped on the wet marble and I went down. Behind me, the entire angry company was trying to cram through the doors at the same time.

I struggled to my knees as Renato climbed clumsily onto the wide balcony railing. The sky boiled with black clouds, and the Gandolfo banners whipped and snapped in the driving rain. Soaked to the skin, the majordomo swung onto the nearest flagpole, then inched out over the canal, hand over hand. I saw his game; he thought he could escape by dropping into the water and swimming for the far pavement.

I got to my feet and staggered toward him, but strong hands dragged me back. It was Franklin.

"No, Nicco," he screamed over the rain and thunder. "Don't touch the pole. It's metal."

A mighty crack exploded in our ears and threw us back against the screaming crowd at the doors. Through a shower of golden

sparks, we saw Renato's body go rigid, then drop off the smoking flagpole like a plummeting stone.

Gandolfo and his guests were shocked into absolute silence. Franklin bowed his head and tightened his arm around my shoulder. "God's scouring artillery," he whispered. "For once it claimed a fitting victim." 🐘

CONVERSATION WITH

BEVERLE GRAVES MYERS

A psychiatrist, Beverle Graves Myers left medicine to write mystery fiction. Her first novel, Interrupted Aria (Poison Pen), brings together her love of opera and history and initiates a series of Baroque mysteries set in 18th century Venice featuring opera singer Tito Amato. When we talked with her, she was in midst of promoting her new book, but she promises us another Nicco Ziani story in the near future.

AHMM: Are all of your stories set in 18th century Italy or Venice?

BGM: My first published story, "A Baroque Phantom," shares the milieu of the Venetian opera house with *Interrupted Aria*, the novel I was writing at the time. After a solid year of spending my writing time recreating Venice, I decided to use my short fiction to explore other times and places. I'm an inveterate researcher. When I'm working on a topic, I can't stop at words in a book. I immerse myself in the food, music, art, and language of the place and period. Two of my favorite settings: a '50s era carnival sideshow touring rural Arkansas and the jockeys' locker room at a contemporary Kentucky Derby. My Nicco Ziani stories are a return to the place that first inspired me.

AHMM: Do you draw on your psychiatry background when you write?

BGM: I draw from my total life experience. Psychiatry as we know it didn't exist in the 18th century, but many of my historical characters suffer from symptoms that would now be ascribed to such disorders as major depression, dementia, and Tourette's syndrome. The major influence from my previous career happens behind the scenes. For every main character, I work up a psycho-social history detailing their fears, desires, strengths, and weaknesses. Most of this material never makes it into the finished work, but I think it makes for well-rounded characters.

AHMM: In this issue's story, what were the challenges of using such an iconic figure as Ben Franklin?

BGM: Historical figures with well-documented lives present more opportunities than challenges. In Edmund Morgan's biography of Benjamin Franklin, I found a wealth of material to draw from. Franklin makes a great character because he was an innovator who bucked the system in devastatingly creative ways. Franklin's trip to Venice is purely fictional, but if he had made the trip, I know he couldn't have looked up at the Campanile without thinking that the huge tower needed a lightning rod. Morgan's

biography also handed me the opening scene of the story. I had originally envisioned Franklin meeting Nicco over a chess game at a coffee-house, but when I learned that he had been a prodigious swimmer in his youth, I was practically compelled to dunk him in the canal.

AHMM: Tell us more about Nicco Ziani and Tito Amato.

BGM: Nicco made his first appearance in "The Casanova Caper." I wanted to work with 18th century historical figures but found their real-life details too confining when plotting a full-length novel. Long stories seemed the perfect vehicle. In Nicco, I created the Baroque equivalent of a hard-boiled P.I. A ruined nobleman, Nicco performs small services for the anxious and desperate in order to support himself and "maintain a decent wig and clean linen." Giacomo Casanova was his first famous client, Franklin his second. I'm currently making notes on a story that will embroil Nicco with a teenage Mozart on the run from his domineering father.

Tito springs from several sources. A singing eunuch does seem exotic, perhaps even comical, to our 21st century mindset. But in his own time, Tito was not so much of an oddity. When opera began in the 17th century, castrati had been singing the soprano parts in church music for centuries. It was a small step from the choir loft to the theatrical stage. As opera developed into popular entertainment, which no self-respecting city could be without, the castrati became its reigning divas. I wanted a sleuth who was very much a product of his times, a man who had personal issues to deal with even as he was

drawn into mysterious doings.

Interrupted Aria introduces Tito as a young man, rather naïve in the ways of the world. His youth and his conflicts about his status as a eunuch make him loath to challenge authority figures directly, but his loyalty to friends and family won't let him rest until truth is revealed. His naïveté often leads him into rash behavior that the more seasoned Nicco would avoid. Tito solves more mysteries with his head than his fists. Nicco probably displays equal measures of brawn and brain. Nicco is a loner in the P.I. tradition while amateur sleuth Tito enjoys working as a team and frequently enlists the help of others.

AHMM: What appeals to you about Venice, and opera, at that time?

BGM: For me, no other place can match the drama of Venice. It began as a reclaimed mudflat, a refuge from marauding barbarians, and grew into a mercantile empire's capital city. A city stuffed with exotic, often stolen, treasures. When trade routes shifted to the West, Venice reinvented herself as the pleasure capital of Europe. That 18th century city clinging desperately to her glorious past, the crossroads of Europe and Asia and magnet for adventurers and scalawags of all sorts, is a perfect backdrop for the kind of mystery fiction that I like to write.

Above all, the music is exquisite. The exalted position that opera held in society also makes for fertile ground for storytelling. The castrati were like today's rock stars, or perhaps winners of *American Idol*. There was as much drama behind stage as out front.

MUSCLE

MATT HUGHES

Cynthia Maidstone had never before seen a man writhing on the floor, clutching himself with both hands and moaning inarticulate syllables of rage and pain. Over her fifty-two years, she was fairly sure she'd encountered it in movies and television, and she was vaguely aware that it was a staple of those repetitious home video programs, whose studio audiences automatically greeted the accidental occurrence of such injury with barks of laughter.

She doubted that Gerald Mallanger was finding anything to laugh about, curled fetally on the carpet of the Fairlawn Country Club's smaller board room. Cynthia almost felt sympathy for the man, but the sentiment merely glided by without pausing to touch down. She set her still firm jaw, drew a long breath through her well-turned nose, put her fists on hips that also remained nicely proportioned, and waited for her best friend's estranged husband to cease making such an unmitigated fuss. After all, the pain couldn't be much compared to childbirth, and it was certainly a lot briefer.

Dodi Mallanger, a plump woman who had come through more than five decades wearing a perpetual expression of mild surprise at whatever life contrived to do to her, was now registering pure astonishment. She gazed down at her spouse, and her eyes and mouth made three circles of the exact same size. Their twenty-eight years of marriage had presented Gerald to her in many positions and aspects that Cynthia had mercifully been spared, but clearly this was a new one.

The fourth person in the room, Marion Caouette, whose broad knee had done the damage, stood with beefy arms folded across an overstuffed chest and regarded the squirming man with equanimity. She nodded, as if he had confirmed some opinion which she had long held and which he had finally brought to an empirical test.

Gerald now let go of his injured parts and made it to his knees. His overfed face was almost crimson, the clipped white mustache



standing out like a noncom's stripe on a red serge mess jacket. There was a bruise on his right cheekbone and a slight trickle of blood from his lip where Cynthia had punched him twice before Marion had stepped in with her conclusive blow.

He looked up at the three women and collectively called them a four-letter word which Cynthia had read in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, but which she had never actually heard spoken aloud.

"I'll kill you!" he ground out, his voice pitched low, to keep the sound from carrying beyond the closed door where it might be heard over the buzz of conversation and the clink of ice against glass, out in the club's main salon. It was the height of the season, and the upper reaches of Oakleigh Park's social order were simultaneously smiling into each other's faces and slipping daggers of gossip into any exposed back.

"I rather think not," said Cynthia. "Instead, you'll write Dodi a check for what she's entitled to."

"The hell I will!"

Marion unfolded her arms and took a step forward. Gerald began to struggle to his feet, fists balled and lower lip stuck out like a schoolboy. That's what Cynthia thought he'd probably been the last time he'd hit anybody who was likely to hit him back—which, of course, did not include Dodi.

"Enough!" Cynthia said, putting out a hand to stay Marion. "Time you started thinking, Gerald!"

He made a noise that originated somewhere between his chest and his mouth. Dodi took an involuntary step back, but Cynthia bored straight in.

"On the other side of that door is everybody whose opinion matters to you, Gerald Mallanger. And if you don't write that check, Dodi and Marion and I are going to walk out into their midst and tell them exactly what we've just done to you. You can kiss a fond fare-thee-well to any hope of becoming the chair of the membership committee."

Now Gerald was making a different noise. Cynthia wouldn't have thought that the color in his face could have deepened, but a decidedly dangerous shade of purple now crept beneath the crimson. He craved the chairmanship with a hunger that would not have disgraced a great white shark.

"If you think you can avoid writing the check by having a stroke instead, we'll still tell them. Then you'll have to sit there, propped up in a hospital bed, while they trail through your room to express their condolences and giggle in the hallway."

She stepped closer, almost nose to nose now, and dropped her

voice to the soft purr that she used when coaxing a nervous thoroughbred through its first baby-sized jumps. "But if you do right by Dodi, then what happened here will never leave this room. Isn't that so, ladies?"

She said it without looking around, knowing that Dodi would be nodding her head like one of the little plastic dogs that some people, somehow, find to be just the perfect touch for the rear window of a car, and that Marion would be twisting her mouth into a wry shape that signified her concurrence.

"I'll get you for this," Gerald whispered. His back was against the door. His breath carried a mingled reek of good whiskey and sour bile.

"Write the check, Gerald," Cynthia said. "It's by far the smartest thing you can do."

And he did. Then he straightened his clothing, wiped his lip with a silk handkerchief, and ran manicured fingers through his silver mane—"A weave," Dodi had long ago confided to Cynthia. Without a backward glance, he opened the door and became one with the crowd.

The check lay on the polished maplewood table that dominated the board room. Dodi picked it up with both hands, and her eyes grew even wider. "My God," she said. "We did it."

Of course, they hadn't meant it to happen that way. Dodi had only been looking for moral support when she'd driven up to Cynthia's acreage in the canyons, where Marion's teenage daughter, Misty, was practicing for her first regional show-jumping competition. Three decades before, Cynthia had been a candidate for the national team, and might have made it if her horse had had as much presence of mind as she did.

She dropped jumping after she married Victor Maidstone and the boys had come along. Now Vic was five years in the ground. Her sons were young men, pursuing their own lives in other places, with other people. A year after the funeral, she sold the townhouse, bought a nicely sited riding stable close to the better suburbs, and began to teach others who wanted to go further than she had.

Misty's horse, Philemon, a deep-chested seven-year-old gray gelding, was boarding at Cynthia's stable while she tried to make a jumper out of him. Lately, with Cynthia on his back, it had finally begun to sink into his equine brain that jumping too soon would mean crashing into the second or third fence of the triple oxer.

Cynthia had already taken him around the course laid out in

the south field once this afternoon. Now she and Marion watched the teenager canter the horse into position and prepare to dig in her heels.

"Looking better," Marion said.

"I don't know," said Cynthia. "I never saw a horse more likely to bolt." It was not quite true, but Cynthia didn't like to think about long-since-dead Pescator, the four-legged scatterbrain that had ruined her one big chance. She signaled the girl to go, then quietly held her breath as Philemon rollicked up to and over the three fences. The rails were set low at this stage, when timing was all that counted, and Cynthia had to admit, the girl's timing was not so bad.

She heard the rattle of tires on gravel behind her, but didn't take her eyes off the horse until it was safely over the last bar. Then she turned to find Dodi, distraught and almost disheveled, getting out of her green Cherokee, a piece of paper in her hand.

"Oh, Cyn, he's . . ." Dodi said, struggling to get it out, "he's just . . . screwing me! That's what he's doing, screwing me, like some competitor he was beating out of a deal." She tried to hand the paper to Cynthia, but her friend declined to take it.

"Wait until Misty's finished," she said, and they did, Dodi fretting almost audibly, as the girl turned the gray and took it once more, a little more smoothly this time, over the triple jump. When Misty trotted the animal over and dismounted, a broad smile brought a glow to her usually low-wattage features.

Cynthia put down a tiny surge of envy and gave the girl an encouraging smile. "Put him away," she said, and turned to take the paper from Dodi.

It was a report from Dodi's lawyers—Cynthia's, originally—to whom the plump woman had gone, bewildered, the month before. Gerald had summarily announced that he wanted a divorce so he could marry the younger, slimmer, altogether more stylish woman he'd apparently been seeing on the side for more than a year. The lawyers were reporting that the Mallanger family assets had been very skillfully slid from view over the past few months, and were now hidden behind impenetrable barriers of Channel Island trusts and offshore bank accounts. It looked as if Dodi might have to settle for the relative pittance her soon-to-be-former husband had flung in her direction.

Cynthia finished reading and handed the letter to Marion, who scanned it quickly, then made a face that left no doubts as to her opinion of Dodi's husband.

"What am I going to do?" Dodi wailed. Her continued brushing had worked her back to where the other two women stood, Marion

holding the piece of paper between them like something stillborn. "Talk to him directly," Cynthia said. "Threaten to make a stink at the club."

"I did. He just laughed. He said most of them had already done what he was doing. Dumping the old bag for a trophy wife is apparently all the rage."

She started to cry. Cynthia put an arm around her shoulders. "Now, now," she said, "maybe what he says and what he'll do if he's pressed are two different things. Vic used to say Gerald was always ready to bluff on a weak hand."

Marion said, "We'll go with you, back you up."

They'd all been planning to be at the Fairlawn Club that night, anyway. The main salon was the venue for the Cowper Foundation's scholarship presentations, an annual exercise in noblesse oblige whereby the tip of Oakleigh's social pyramid dispensed tokens of grace and favor to a few young but deserving denizens of its lower tiers.

Cynthia was on the foundation's selection committee. Marion's husband, Gil, was a benefactor, although education had played no part in his rise to wealth. He had sold the family sawmills back East at a time when their timber holdings were at a premium, then used the proceeds to get into and out of Sunbelt real estate at precisely the right times. The impetus to back the scholarship fund came from Marion. Three generations of her family had been hands in Caouette mills, and her father had scraped to send her to college so she would not end up working for a wage.

Dodi had planned to attend the reception—"Just to show the flag," was how she put it—but the letter from the lawyers had undercut her confidence. "I don't think I could bear it," she now told Cynthia and Marion, "everybody speaking to me in careful tones, as if I were crystal that might suddenly shatter."

"Or a bomb that might suddenly explode," Marion said.

"I'm sure Gerald can be brought to see reason," Cynthia said. "All this—" she indicated the letter "—may be just male menopausal bravado."

"Will you come with me?" Dodi asked.

"Of course I will," said Cynthia.

"Me too," said Marion.

Although, strictly speaking, Dodi hadn't included her in the invitation, she was glad to think of her standing close by when she called Gerald's bluff. She found Marion Caouette somehow quietly reassuring, like a well-laid floor.

The three arrived at the gala when the salon was already full and the noise was approaching that level where individual conversations dissolve into a general blare. Dodi and Marion went into the small board room, while Cynthia crossed to a corner where Gerald Mallanger stood with his fellow silverbacks, each accoutered with whiskey and cigar, and all centered around the club's president, Taylor Finshaw.

Finshaw was, as always, delivering one of his interminable golf stories. And, as ever, the tale reflected the maximum credit on their teller, while placing some absent golfing partner in a less than favorable light. Acknowledged as the wealthiest and most influential man in Oakleigh, Finshaw had inherited a fortune in his twenties, which he had since quadrupled by dint of a moderately cunning brain, abetted by an entirely ruthless character.

Somewhere in the room, surrounded by her own clique of hangers-on, would be Taylor's wife, Carmen Finshaw. Although less thin than an Italian stiletto, she was just as polished and easily more dangerous.

Once, and briefly, Cynthia had tried to teach the rudiments of horsemanship to the Finshaws' teenage daughter, a vicious little bundle of pouts and sneers named Frisia. The one and only lesson had apparently marked the girl's first experience of not being allowed to do whatsoever she pleased. Frisia had also not enjoyed being told that the next time she struck one of Cynthia's horses, she would learn firsthand how it felt to have a braided leather quirt—the one Taylor Finshaw had given her for her birthday—applied to her backside.

Since then, the Finshaws had not deigned to notice Cynthia's existence. The continuing snub did not, however, prevent the male half of Oakleigh's social pinnacle from sliding his eyes over her, from ankles to neck, as she approached and took Dodi's husband's arm.

"Gerald, I wonder if I might have a word," she said, "in private?"

He allowed himself to be led away, with one wink over his shoulder to encourage the raised eyebrows and nudging elbows with which the others were marking his being cut from the herd by the Maidstone woman, who was to many of them an arrangement of female flesh still worth considering.

Gerald's smirk sagged into a frown the moment Cynthia led him through the door and into an encounter with his estranged wife.

Dodi began badly, stumbling over the words she had prepared to say. Cynthia stepped in and picked up the fumbled ball. "It

won't do, Gerald. You can't treat your wife this way. People won't stand for it."

But it turned out that Gerald thought he could treat Dodi any way he chose. He drained his whiskey and set the glass on the maplewood, then proceeded to give them a cigar-enhanced display of egotism that made Cynthia blink. With the Havana Churchill clamped between his square incisors, he sneered and shrugged, dared Dodi to do the worst her lawyers could come up with, and ended by inviting them all to kiss a part of him that Cynthia, by now, would have enjoyed kicking.

He stubbed out the cigar in the whiskey glass in cold contempt and strode to the door. Dodi, stammering, tears darkly streaking her cheeks, reached for his arm to pull him around. Gerald spun, covered her face with one fleshy hand, and pushed her backward so that the broadest part of her crashed painfully against the big table.

Cynthia thought she was about to say something dreadful, something ruinously cutting, to this contemptible man. It took her by surprise, therefore, to find that she was instead stepping toward him and that her right fist was delivering two quick blows to his sneer. She struck him the way she would have struck a horse that was trying the sly stable trick of pushing her up against the side of a stall, short hard impacts that drove his head back and drew blood from his lip.

Gerald slid out the tip of his pale tongue to taste the blood. "You bitch!" he said, and drew back his own larger and more experienced fist.

It was then that Marion Caouette drove the heel of her pump into his left shin and brought up the hard knee that ended matters.

"Arrogant bastard," Marion said, when Gerald had left the room.

"Oh my God," Dodi repeated.

"Never mind," said Cynthia, still wondering from what unknown part of her had come the impulse to strike the man. "It's all done and best forgotten. But not a word to anyone." She had no doubt that what she had seen in Gerald Mallanger's eyes as he had knelt in pain and humiliation was murderous rage, barely controlled. "This didn't happen, and we'll never speak of it again."

Cynthia did speak of it to herself, though. She was accustomed to pursuing her thoughts through the medium of internal conversations, dividing her psyche into two sides of a debate, the better to mull things over. She came to the conclusion that what she had done to Gerald was what her Vic, or any other right-thinking man,

would have done under the circumstances. He was a bully who deserved to have his tail lowered, especially if it served the purpose of seeing her friend properly provided for.

"But the fact is, we committed a crime," one side of her said. "Assault, possibly aggravated assault, compounded by extortion. And yet we fully expect to get away with it."

"People of our circle," countered her other side—though she winced at the superiority implicit in the phrase—"often commit crimes and get away with them. Perhaps not murder and mayhem—" although she remembered some celebrated trials that sometimes had her believing that a sufficiently well-paid battery of lawyers could blunt any prosecution—"but certainly many malfeasances go unpunished. One of our men can get away with financial skullduggery in the millions and be admired for it by his peers. Yet if some bookkeeper in an off-the-rack suit did much the same thing for five thousand, he'd be jailed for fraud."

In the end, she came to the conclusion that she'd done wrong in a right cause. But the truth she dared not admit to herself was that the few seconds of physical conflict had brought her back to a quality of experience she had thought to have abandoned in some turn of the road behind her, left with her youth.

It had been wonderful to hit Gerald Mallanger, to surrender completely to sudden rage. She had not felt so much alive, not since the last time she had set a spirited horse at an eight-foot-high wall, with glory or ignominy on the other side, feeling the animal's hind quarters bunch and its front hooves leave the turf, the leap begun and nothing to do but ride it to the end.

In the weeks that followed, she would think of Gerald's preposterous face looming like a harvest moon tethered to the horizon, and her fist flashing toward it, and she would sigh.

She didn't speak of it to anyone else, and as far as she knew, neither did the other two women. But somehow it became known, as these things do, that Dodi had won a better settlement from Gerald than had first been offered, and that her friends Cynthia Maidstone and Marion Caouette (with whom both Cynthia and Dodi now found themselves spending more time than before) had had a hand in it.

So Cynthia might have expected, might even, without admitting it, have quietly hoped, that eventually some other friend or acquaintance would sidle up to her and shyly broach the subject. But she wouldn't have thought the shy sidler would be Madelaine Shaftebury, whose skeletal thinness and social rank almost rivaled that of her closest crony, Carmen Finshaw.

"It's my babies," Madelaine said, her long, narrow face as full of despair as a Munch portrait. She brushed past Cynthia's attempted denials. "He's taking my babies."

So, of course, Cynthia had to agree to hear her out, standing at the buffet line between the curried shrimp and the quiche, while pent-up demand began to build in the other members of the Oakleigh Women's Literacy Movement queued up behind them.

"There's a table in the far corner," Cynthia said. She caught Dodi and Marion's collective eye across the room, and gestured them to join her and Madelaine there.

The "he" in question was, as Cynthia had expected, Pemberton Shaftebury, to whom Madelaine had been wed the summer after she—and the Edsel—had come out. The marriage had lasted longer than the auto, but without engendering an equivalent ardor. Now it was reaching its climax, courtesy of Pem's suddenly renewed interest in firm female flesh, of which his skeletal wife had little remaining. She was as thin and tall as a woman could safely be without invoking thoughts of carnival sideshows. Her features fell sharply back from the bladelike prominence of her nose, around which, Cynthia suspected, her countersunk eyes must have had trouble focusing on anything that loomed too close.

"Your babies?" Cynthia said, when the four women were seated at the table, heads leaning toward each other. She could recall no second generation of Shafteburys. "What babies?" she asked.

"I've collected them since I was a girl," Madelaine said. "I couldn't part with a single one, and now Pem says he's taking half of them. That's the law, he says. I could *kill* him."

Dodi caught it then. Gerald, in his hunger for social advancement, had once gotten the Mallangers invited to a Shaftebury dinner party. "You mean your glass!" Dodi said.

"My babies," Madelaine nodded. "My poor babies."

Cynthia remembered now that the woman had accumulated an uncommon collection of glassware—bowls, vases, knickknacks, sculpture—over more than five decades. Some were pieces of great price, Lalique or antique Venetian; others were of only sentimental value, but that value was monumental to Madelaine Shaftebury.

Her departing husband, whose powers of imagination were in inverse proportion to the size of his inherited fortune, had seized, with an unshakeable grip that pitbulls might envy, upon the notion of an equal division of property. He was resolved to apportion everything fifty-fifty, including his wife's glass collection. And nothing, neither tears, nor logic, nor lawyers' letters, would sway him from his aim.

"The Shafteburys are known for their single-mindedness," Madelaine said.

Comes from having only one brain cell between them, Cynthia said to herself, while aloud she said, "But what do you think we can do about it?"

Madelaine shrugged and looked away. "Just come with me while I try to reason with him one last time."

"You just want us there for moral support?" Dodi put in.

"Well," said Madelaine, examining the design on the club's cutlery.

The main part of Cynthia was hoping that Marion would say no. That would end the discussion, the way her knee had ended the confrontation with Gerald. Instead, her newfound friend quirked her eyebrows and moved her mouth in a sideways twist that said, "What the hell?"

"I suppose it would be the right thing to do," Cynthia said. She did not want to look inward at that moment, because she would have seen the recently rediscovered part of her, a small but rapidly growing part, rising up and putting a fist into the air.

They drove to the Shaftebury house after eight in Dodi's Jeep. Madelaine let them in herself, explaining that she had given the housekeeper an unexpected evening off. "I thought that would be best," she said. "Pem's right through here."

She led them into the library, where Pemberton Shaftebury sat primly erect in a wing chair, unruffled in muted tones and gentle fabrics, pursuing his customary after-dinner enjoyment of the newspaper crossword. He prided himself on knowing his way around an acrostic.

"Don't get up," Cynthia was about to say, before realizing that the man's habit of ignoring his wife now extended to her guests.

Madelaine stood in front of her husband's chair, and waved the three visitors to range themselves behind her.

"Pemberton," she said, quietly but firmly, "I want all of my babies."

He looked up, blinked rapidly a few times, then refocused his gaze on the puzzle. A slight smile crossed his lips as he filled in a couple of vacant squares.

"I said," Madelaine repeated, in exactly the same tone, "I want all of my babies."

There was no answer. They all waited in a silence broken only by the scratch of Pemberton Shaftebury's pen across the newsprint. Then Madelaine smoothly stooped and seized the front legs of the wing chair. Lifting with her legs, and not her back, she just as smoothly but quite suddenly stood up, so that

the chair tipped over backwards, taking her husband with it.

Pemberton emitted a squawk that might have been the precursor of a full sentence, but before any more sounds came out of him, Madelaine stalked around the chair, knelt beside him, and began an endless rain of blows on his upturned face, her long, thin arms rising and falling like the parts of some antiquated machine. Each impact was accompanied by one of the syllables from her chanting, mantralike, "All of them, all of them, all of them . . ." in the same restrained but steadfast tone.

It was only seconds before Cynthia and Marion moved to pull the woman away. Dodi, again, merely watched with wide eyes and parted lips.

Pemberton, his face blotchy red from his wife's attentions, a slight rivulet of blood running from his swelling nose and across his upper lip, lay looking up at them, breathing hard.

Finally, he swallowed and said, "Madelaine, you've gone quite mad."

"Not quite," she answered, still calm. "But if you don't give up your ridiculous claim to my babies, I will go into whatever territory lies beyond mad. And then we will all do to you exactly what was done to Gerald Mallanger."

She made as if to pull free of the other women's hands and commit further outrages. Pemberton raised his hands to shield his face, making a noise like a duck with a sore throat. "All right!" he said. "The glass is yours!"

They left him there, still tipped over, one knuckle nudging gently at his bleeding nostril, and went into what Madelaine called "the parlor." Cynthia had been in houses that were scarcely larger than this one vast room. The far wall was done in shelves of polished dark wood, on which the "babies" glistened and shone under carefully arranged lighting. Madelaine walked to the end of the room, raised her arms to the shelves like Nixon waving his final goodbye, and let go a grand sigh.

"Madelaine," said Cynthia, "what on earth did you mean about doing to Pemberton 'what was done to Gerald Mallanger?'"

The woman turned and came back to them. She narrowed her eyes, somehow making her face even thinner and sharper than its usual axe-edge proportions. "Women like you," she said, her eyes moving to take in Dodi and Marion as well, "women like you, who go to university and run businesses, you think that women like me are a lot of empty-headed ninnies."

Cynthia was about to make the obligatory denial—although the description was not wholly inaccurate—but Madelaine shushed

her with a wave of an attenuated hand. "Just because we went to finishing school and learned which fork to use and how to say *chacun à son goût*, does not mean that we put away our brains with our trousseaux the moment we were tied to some man. Women like me were running great houses and great families, even great countries, before women like you were ever invented."

"I assure you . . ." Cynthia began, but Madelaine raised an imperious finger.

"I saw Gerald follow you into a room, and I saw him come out not three minutes later. I saw how he looked going in, and I saw how he walked coming out. And I drew the appropriate conclusions. So did quite a few of the people who were there, I'm sure."

"We promised we wouldn't tell," said Dodi.

"And you haven't. Because you needn't."

"But Gerald might not realize that," Cynthia said. "There could be a problem if he thinks we did."

Madelaine sniffed. "Leave Gerald Mallanger to me. The silly little man positively drools to be membership chairman. If he has that, it will be enough to keep him happy. I'll have Pern say a word to Ollie and Porter, and all will be well in the garden." She let her eyes drift to her babies. "I suppose it's the least I can do, after using you in such a calculating manner."

"Do you think your husband will cooperate?" Cynthia asked her.

"I mean, after . . ."

"He'll be delighted."

"Next time someone asks whatever happened to Lucrezia Borgia, I'll know the answer," said Cynthia, as they pulled out of the long drive that led to the Shaftesbury house.

"I need a drink," Marion said.

"That's what we pay dues for," said Dodi, swinging the wheel. Ten minutes later, they were at a corner table in the lounge that had been, in the original arrangement of the Fairlawn, the Ladies' Retreat, and which somehow still seemed to offer a more hospitable ambience for female members than any other room at the club.

The steward knew their tastes and responded to Marion's wave by bringing them two gin and tonics and a bourbon on ice. They reached for the drinks the moment they touched the table, and each took more than a sip. Marion put the whiskey glass to her forehead, closed her eyes, and said, "My babies." Then she had to bite her lip.

The other two women both spoke at once.

"What have we got ourselves into?" Cynthia said.

"My God, wasn't that just the best thing ever?" said Dodi, giggling.

Marion stared at Dodi, her usually loquacious features held rigid. But then, piece by piece, the rigor broke down—first around the eyes, then at the corners of the mouth, then spreading to her whole stocky torso, which began to shake with silent laughter.

"Did you see him lying there?" she spluttered, two red spots rising on her cheeks. "His little feet, up and down like a tantrum. And all the time, Madelaine's beating the other end like a tin drum."

"Wait a minute," Cynthia began.

"Hey, Pem, what's a five-letter word for whup-your-ass?" Dodi said, her voice breaking on the last syllable.

"Guys," Cynthia tried again. "Come on."

"*You've gone quite mad, my dear,*" Marion mimicked, then her fists beat a rapid tattoo on the tabletop. She and Dodi collapsed into fits of giggles and snorts, covering their mouths with their hands, tears squeezing from the corners of their eyes.

"It's not funny," Cynthia managed to get out, but then the contagion caught her. She put her palms flat on the tabletop and lowered her forehead to her knuckles, while her sides shook and long, rolling peals of laughter bubbled up from some subbasement she'd forgotten was ever there.

"This is getting out of hand," Cynthia said, when she could breathe again.

"My side hurts," Dodi said.

Marion drummed on the table, which set them off again.

"Ow," said Dodi, one hand holding her ribs.

"No, really," said Cynthia. "This is not good."

"Worried?" said Marion.

"No," said Cynthia, then corrected herself. "Well, maybe a little. You know, we were just accessories to an assault. Pemberton would have the law on his side."

"He was more concerned about having Madelaine all over his noggin," Dodi said, then had to hold her side again.

"I'm just afraid we're getting into something we can't control. I mean, what do we think we're doing?"

"Having fun," said Dodi, "for a change."

"And doing a little good," Marion put in.

"Well, that's true," Cynthia had to agree. "But although the ends are right, the means are out of line."

"So what?" Marion said. "Look, this club is full of men who think they can do whatever the hell they want. They've got money and power, most of it handed down to them by their daddies, and they use them both any old way they choose. We're just

giving the worst of them a taste of their own medicine."

"Besides," said Dodi, "we haven't robbed them or anything. And we didn't do it for money, so it's not like we're hired muscle."

"Hired muscle?" Cynthia said. "You've been reading too many mysteries."

Dodi stuck out her tongue, and for a moment Cynthia remembered the girl her friend had been, way back when the world was made of simpler shapes painted in brighter colors.

"Admit it, Cyn," Marion said. "You liked it too. They had it coming and it was fun being the good guys."

Cynthia hung her head just a little. "All right, I admit it. We're the Three Musketeers. We're Robin Hood's merry sisters, righting wrongs and raising hell in a genteel way. Just let's not go looking for trouble."

"I don't think we'll have to," said Marion, inclining her head toward the imposing woman in a designer original who had just appeared in the lounge's doorway.

"Isn't that Allison Moberley?" Dodi asked. "The woman who owns the Exotique chain?"

"And a prime member of Madelaine Shaftebury's clique," said Cynthia, her insides suddenly bubbling with a mix of excitement and apprehension. "I have a feeling that in Madelaine's definition of keeping a secret, telling your friends doesn't count."

"That's our definition too," said Dodi.

"Here she comes," Marion said, folding her arms across her chest.

Teddy Shankhill saw the plump woman in the pale silk suit bending over the engine compartment of the green Grand Cherokee as soon as he got off the elevator in the second-to-top floor of the downtown parking garage. He couldn't have missed her, since the Jeep was parked in the space next to his XJ-series Jag.

When she heard his footsteps, she withdrew her head from under the raised hood and said, "Could you please help me? I don't know anything about cars."

He was about to walk by, leaving only a flippant remark, but something about the woman's vulnerability nudged the avarice that was never dormant in him. Female helplessness, in Teddy's experience, was a reliable starting point for an increase in his net worth. He gave her a quick but expert appraisal as he approached, totting up the combined worth of the Dior suit, the double strand of pearls, and the wink of diamonds from the wed-

ding set on her left hand, and decided his afternoon massage could wait.

He gave her his boyish smile, and saw it smooth most of the anxiety from her once pretty face. "What seems to be the trouble?"

"I think there's a loose wire," the woman said.

He glanced at the engine, about which he knew little more than she did. "Where?" he said.

"Down there in the back." She pointed at a piece of curved plastic. "Behind that round black thing. But I can't reach it."

Teddy stooped over the Jeep's innards.

"I don't see . . ." he said, but the rest of his response was superseded by the thump of the Cherokee's hood against the crown of his head. The sheet of steel was propelled downward by Marion and Cynthia, who had been waiting, crouched behind the car, for Dodi to signal that the mouse was in the trap.

"The handcuffs!" Cynthia said.

"Oh yes, sorry," Dodi said, reaching into the pocket of her jacket for the restraints. Cynthia pulled the dazed man's arms together behind his back and Dodi slipped the cuffs on. Marion knelt and cinched his ankles together with a broad leather belt. Then, just as they had practiced it, they lifted the hood, caught Teddy as he sagged toward the floor, and stood him more or less upright. His eyes were unfocused. Dodi slapped a strip of duct tape across his mouth and put a pillowcase over his head. A minute later, he was under a blanket in the Cherokee's rear compartment, and they were rolling out the exit ramp.

Teddy regained full consciousness before they made it back to the woods above the stables, a spot chosen for its isolation. He began to push his knees into the back of the rear seat, causing Dodi some discomfort.

"Don't fuss, dear," she said. "We don't want to have to hit you on the head again."

Teddy settled down.

They parked in a small stand of maples and rolled the man out of the vehicle. "Who's got the scissors?" Cynthia said, at which Teddy curled up into a ball and began to make muffled noises under the pillowcase.

"We're just going to cut your clothes off," Dodi said. "We need you naked, you see, and we can't risk untying you."

Teddy twitched once or twice when the steel touched his skin, but it wasn't long before the tattered pieces of his Versace suit were scattered around.

"Shoes off or on?" Marion asked.

"Off, I think," Cynthia said. "He looks silly wearing just socks and shoes."

"Thought that was the point."

"Off," Cynthia repeated.

When he was stretched on the ground, naked except for the restraints and the pillowcase, Cynthia bent over him. "I suppose you're wondering why we've done this?" she asked.

The pillowcase nodded vigorously.

"I should think you'd be more interested in knowing what we're going to do next." She clicked the scissors so he could hear the noise they made.

Teddy froze.

"Well," said Cynthia, "we thought that first we'd give you an injection of a rather strong animal tranquilizer, then we'd paint parts of you some interesting colors, and finally we'd release you naked outside that oyster bar which seems to be your favorite place to meet friends."

"What about the daffodil?" Dodi said.

"Oh yes," Cynthia said. "One of us wants to stick a daffodil . . . well, I'm sure you get the picture."

By now, Teddy was moving again. Marion put a foot on his chest, and he stopped.

Cynthia said, "But let's get back to your original question: why are we doing this?"

The pillowcase now seemed very alert for a pillowcase.

"You have some photographs," Cynthia went on. "We'd like to have them, and the negatives."

Teddy began to thrash again. "Tell him about the Crazy Glue," Dodi said.

Teddy lay still.

"Oh yes. One of my friends thinks that glue is better than paint. We're having trouble making up our minds. Perhaps you have an opinion?"

Muffled sounds came from under the pillowcase. Cynthia reached in and stripped away the tape without uncovering the man's eyes.

"Which photos did you want?" said Teddy.

"You mean there's more than one set? That hadn't occurred to us," Cynthia said. She thought for a moment, then said, "We'd better have them all."

Teddy said things that none of them wanted to take personally.

"You know," said Dodi, "the daffodil would probably stay put better if we used the Crazy Glue on it."

"That's true," said Cynthia.

"All right," said Teddy. "How do we do this?"

They had that all worked out as well. Within an hour, they had retrieved the photos and negatives from the cache Teddy had created beneath the floorboards of his beachfront condo. They left him handcuffed under the blanket in a disused gravel pit several miles away. Nearby, they piled some jeans, a sweatshirt, and a pair of flip-flop thongs that would probably fit, along with the handcuff key. By the time Teddy got the pillowcase off, the Cherokee was long gone.

For a while afterwards, he wished he had memorized the license plate. But eventually, he could admit to himself that he would just as soon never run into those terrifying women again.

Cynthia, Dodi, and Marion found some of Teddy's photo collection surprising, but most of them were only sad. They gave Allison Moberley the ones that he had used to blackmail her with, declining her offer to pick anything they wanted from her stores. The rest of the pictures they burned in Cynthia's fireplace.

"Well, that was fun," said Dodi, watching the flames. "What's next?"

"Nothing, for God's sake!" Cynthia said. "We've got to stop it before we get into trouble. Suppose that man had had a gun?"

"We'd have glued it to him," Marion said.

"No," said Cynthia. "No more. It's been fun. It's been exciting. But I can't help thinking we've been dancing blindfolded on the edge of a cliff. Let's just get back to normal, before somebody gets hurt."

The Fairlawn's annual election of officers was held on an autumn Saturday. The occasion marked the first visit the three friends had made to the club in some weeks, they having thought it wise to let time build up some insulation between them and their newfound notoriety. Cynthia and Dodi came together, choosing seats in a rear row of the ranked chairs where they were less likely to be noticed and where they could catch Marion's attention when she arrived a little later, after dropping Misty off somewhere in town.

But they had scarcely sat down before they realized that the smiles and beckoning gestures coming from Madelaine Shaftebury and Allison Moberley, at the front of the room, were directed at them.

"So much for back to normal," Cynthia said. All around them, she saw eyebrows rise, heads incline together, and the beginnings of whispered conversations throughout the room.

"Oh my God," Dodi whispered, as they made their way forward.

"We'd prefer not to draw attention to ourselves, Madelaine," Cynthia said when they arrived at the front of the room.

"Nonsense," was the reply. "Let them look. Let them prattle. One is who one is."

A few moments later, with the meeting about to begin, Marion Caouette arrived. It was an event which should have been noted by few. Instead, it drew the eyes and comments of all, because in the crook of Marion's arm rested the whip-thin limb of Carmen Finshaw.

The queen of Oakleigh society ignored the murmurs and stares, sweeping Marion to the elite clique in the first row. She declared that she had encountered the mill worker's daughter in the parking lot and "begged her to lead me to the other two musketeers." Dodi smothered a laugh. Cynthia drew her lips into a tight line and said nothing.

"It's all right, dear," Carmen went on, "I know what you've been doing, and I heartily approve."

Those close enough to hear Carmen's public blessing passed it in murmurs and whispers through the rest of the seated crowd. Clearly, everyone else in the room knew what they'd been up to.

Madelaine Shaftebury was looking languidly about, rather like a long-necked wading bird seeking a frog to spear. "Is Taylor not to be with us?" she said.

Carmen Finshaw's frosted head moved briefly on the svelte cords of her neck. "He said something, a meeting of one of his boards, I gathered."

"Not like him to miss the election of officers," Allison said. "He is president, after all."

"He'll arrive eventually, I'm sure," Carmen said, and changed the subject.

As vice president, Pemberton Shaftebury rapped his gavel on the felt-covered head table to open the meeting in Taylor Finshaw's absence. Officers read their reports, then the meeting proceeded to elections. Gerald Mallanger's name was placed in unopposed nomination for chairman of the membership committee, and he was duly voted in. He advanced to the head table and made some remarks, his hands gripping the small podium as if it contained the keys to heaven, and his dull eyes brushing over the membership like a prince taking obligatory note of his courtiers.

Dodi dropped her eyes, but Cynthia nodded cordially as her gaze met Gerald's. She was rewarded with a sudden flash of the same lethal rage that had leaped at her as he had kneeled in the

small board room. It was quickly suppressed, and his eyes moved on, but the flare of murderous hate had been as clear as the flash from a lighthouse across a dark channel. An involuntary shiver raced up her spine and shook itself free from her shoulders.

"I'm sorry," she said to Carmen Finshaw. The woman had just said something. "I was listening to Gerald."

"Can't think why," was the response. "Such a curious mixture of fawning gratitude and preening egotism. But I was saying that I'm sure our Frisia could benefit from a return to your tutelage. Would Thursday afternoon be convenient?"

Cynthia knew there was no point in starting something that would not be finished. "She would need to be more . . . receptive to my suggestions," she said. "The last time . . ."

Carmen cut her off. "I wouldn't worry about that, my dear. I've already spoken to her. She knows you are not a woman to be trifled with." She looked to the rear of the room. "Ah, there's Taylor now."

The man who occupied Oakleigh's social pinnacle made his usual sedate progress to the head table as Gerald Mallanger was taking his long-sought seat. Finshaw paused to nod—it was almost a bow—to his wife and her companions in the first row of seats. It was only then that he noticed Cynthia and her two friends.

Cynthia looked up to see a series of expressions pass in rapid succession across his self-satisfied face. First came his usual blank indifference to all others, a product of inborn arrogance. There followed a sudden flash of recognition, which immediately gave way to a pale wash of fear behind his eyes, before being just as quickly buried beneath a conscious redrawing of his habitual uninterested stare. He rounded the table and stepped to the podium, and took charge of the rest of the meeting.

In the little more than a second that it had taken Taylor Finshaw to react to finding her and her friends in the company of his wife, Cynthia had grasped exactly why the three of them had been so precipitously promoted to the social vanguard. They were to be cocked and aimed at a new target.

Less than half an hour later, the members having discussed and voted on the Fairlawn's plans for the year, the annual general meeting wound down to Taylor's final gaveling of the felt-covered table. Club staff opened the room-high doors to the adjacent reception room. The members rose and waited for the Finshaws to lead them to the refreshments. Despite imperiously summoning looks from Madelaine Shaftebury and Allison Moberley, who fell in with their husbands in the second rank, Cynthia held Dodi and Marion back.

"I'm leaving," she said. "You should too."

"What?" said Marion, and at the same time Dodi asked, "Why?"

"Carmen wants us to do something to Taylor."

Dodi's eyes expanded. "Did she tell you that?"

"No," Cynthia said. "He did. He was trying not to, but it was written on his face."

"Wow," Dodi said. Marion frowned in a way that somehow caused the cords in her neck to pop out.

"We don't need this," Cynthia said, and her friends agreed.

"Guys like Pem and Gerald are one thing," Marion said. "When we say they act like they can get away with murder, that's just talk. Taylor Finshaw's the kind who might just give it a try."

"I wouldn't be surprised if he already has," Dodi said, and shuddered.

"I don't know what he's done to Carmen, or what she thinks we're going to do *for* her," Cynthia said, "and I don't care. I'm out of the hired muscle business."

"Me too."

"Oh my God."

"We'd better make sure Taylor knows that," Cynthia said. "Wait here."

She went into the reception room, where the Fairlawn's various cliques had already sorted themselves into nodes and satellites, with uniformed waiters whisking trays of champagne and delicacies through the intervening spaces. She spotted Taylor in the power center of the room, Gerald and Pemberton at his elbows, while other silverbacks clustered close, leaning in as if E. F. Hutton, the Wall Street brokerage made famous in an old advertising campaign, was about to say the sooth.

Cynthia felt the crowd's attention swing toward her as she crossed the floor, inserted herself into the group, and touched Taylor's elbow. "Taylor," she said, "I wonder if I might have a word?"

There was an instant hush, the constant clink of glasses borne on elevated trays now sounding as loud as an advancing panzer division. Every eye in the room was fixed upon Cynthia Maidstone and Taylor Finshaw—every eye except the six owned by his wife and her two cronies, who were studiously examining the brocade of the cloth covering the buffet table, which they had seen and ignored a hundred times before.

Taylor looked first at Cynthia's fingertips where they touched his sleeve, then at her serious face, then over at Dodi and Marion, visible through the open doors that connected to the meeting

room. A jovial expression remained painted on his countenance, but the skin that was its canvas paled noticeably. He took a breath and said, "Perhaps later."

Oh my, thought Cynthia, that was the wrong approach. Aloud, pitching her voice to carry throughout the hushed room, she said, "There has been a mistake, Taylor. Whatever Carmen has told you, it's not going to happen. Nothing's going to happen."

Taylor raised his glass and sipped champagne. Cynthia had to admire the lack of tremor in his hand. "I have no idea what you're talking about," he said.

"Fine," she answered. "Let's leave it like that."

She turned on her heel, collected Dodi and Marion, and the three friends went out into the autumn air. The muted rumble and buzz of voices from the reception room followed their footsteps until the front doors swung closed behind them.

"I've had enough of this place," Marion said. "Whatta you say we start our own club?"

The clock radio's LED read 2:40 A.M., more than three hours before its alarm would tell Cynthia to get up and get the day started. She focused sleepy eyes on the red digits, separated by a flashing colon. She'd been having the dream about riding Pescator again, on that awful day, her knees urging him up to the water barrier, feeling the tension building in him, knowing that he was going to balk, just as he always balked whenever she had the dream. If she didn't wake up, she'd be tossed over his head, and he'd be running off around the course, kicking his heels, while the commentators made sympathetic noises, and all her dreams faded to black.

But it hadn't been the dream that woke her. She knew that somehow. She rolled onto her back and wondered what was wrong. That was when she heard the horses screaming.

She threw back the covers and was at the window in a second, yanking the curtains out of the way to look down into the stable yard. Nothing. Doors closed, lights on, no lurking figures. Yet she could hear Philemon and Packy and Buck, the terrible, shrill scream of panicked horses, the metal-shod hooves crashing against the floorboards and the sides of their stalls.

She flung herself downstairs, wrapping her robe around her. Out the side door and across the flagstones to the stables, grab the steel handle of the big door. Now she could smell the smoke, sweet and sharp, the acrid bite of burning hay.

She prepared to slam the door sideways, knowing that pulling it might be the last thing she ever did. If the hay was smoldering,

throwing open the door would let in a sudden gush of flame-feeding oxygen. Then she would be hit by a blast of superheated air that would cook the inside of her lungs while it tossed her across the yard like a puppet with its strings cut. But she couldn't stand there and listen to the animals scream.

She took a deep breath, then yanked the door aside. There was no explosion. Her eyes went first to the hay bales stacked at the rear of the stable, but she saw no flames, no telltale glow of embers. There was smoke in the air, quite a lot of it, but she couldn't see where it was coming from. Then she realized that all of the inside lights were off.

Electrical? she asked herself. But it was hay she was smelling, she was sure of that. And the outside lights were working, though they were all on the same circuit.

"What the hell?" Cynthia said, took a deep breath, and went into the stable. She'd get the horses out and wait to find out what was going on.

Two steps inside, the smoke stung her eyes and she could feel heat on her face. There *was* a fire, and it was close. She moved forward, gingerly, eyes streaming, hands extended. She felt her way through the smoky darkness, her palms guiding her as if they were playing a real-life version of the old hot-and-cold game she'd played with her boys when they were children.

Fifteen feet into the smoky blackness, she found the source of the heat. Through streaming eyes, she saw red beneath the pall of smoke, down low. She nudged a toe forward, and connected with the old steel washtub that should have been hanging on the wall near the cupboard that held farrier's tools. Instead, here it was in the middle of the wide central aisle between the stalls. What the hell is this doing here? she wondered. And why is it full of burning hay?

She'd leave the questions till later. If that was all the fire amounted to, she'd douse it now, before it could spread, then get the horses into the fresh air.

"If this is somebody's idea of a joke," she said aloud, groping toward the fire extinguisher that should be hanging on a post between two empty stalls. Talking was a mistake. The biting fumes rasped the lining of her airway, and she coughed. Clamping her lips closed, trying to ignore the unbearable tickle in her chest, she finally found the upright timber, then the metal cylinder. She pulled it free from its steel bracket, and turned back to the burning hay.

The need to cough became overwhelming, triggering a spasm

that almost doubled her over. Stooped, she felt a rush of air as something passed through the space where her head had just been and smashed into the post.

Cynthia spun around and flung the extinguisher at the smoky darkness. She heard it hit something softer than the wall. There was a whining, guttural growl, oddly muffled, and she knew that all she had done was to make her assailant even more angry.

She threw herself backwards, but not quite quickly enough. Whatever had been swung at her before now came back for a second blow. Something hard and heavy, a club with a sharp edge was the image that popped into her mind, grazed the muscle between her left shoulder and neck.

Even the glancing blow, softened by the thick fabric of her robe, was enough to numb her left arm. If that hits me in the head, I'm done for, said a part of her that had coolly detached itself from the fear and confusion, while she backpedaled through the choking blackness of the stable.

The smoke was getting thicker, but she could sense more than see a grayness to her left—the door to the light-filled stable yard. She needed to get out there, away from whoever was stalking her, whoever had set the fire as bait to draw her into this trap.

Gerald? inquired her internal commentator. Taylor Finshaw? Maybe even that Teddy, if he found out . . . The thought ended in another fit of coughing. She wiped her eyes and headed for the open door, close enough now to see it as a dim oblong.

Then she saw the shape pass between her and the gray light, too indistinct to identify. *That's where he'll be waiting.* Coughing, she backed away.

There was another door, human-sized, beyond the hay-store. But whoever had trapped her would have blocked it, she was sure. *Time to think, before you suffocate.*

She crouched to the floor. The smoke was thinner here. She could see all the way to the door, to the pair of legs between her and the light.

The horses were still shrieking. Misty's high-strung Philemon was making a lot of the noise, but her own buckskin quarter horse, appropriately named Buck, was adding plenty to the din. Big Packy—short for pachyderm because she walked as slowly as an elephant—was rumbling and whickering, like an outraged dowager demanding an explanation.

That's it, half of Cynthia's mind told the other. *Cavalry charge.* She scrambled on hands and knees to Packy's stall, stood upright, and felt her way along a wall to the head of the enclosure where

the oversized horse's halter was tethered to an iron ring. She slipped the rope loose, talking and patting and stroking, and backed the big mare out of the stall.

That brought Packy's nose closer to the source of the smoke, and she stamped and pulled toward the doorway.

"No, wait, there's a baby, good girl," Cynthia whispered, as she snugged the lead rope through an iron bracket bolted to the post where the fire extinguisher had been. "Let me get Buck."

She crawled to the quarter horse's stall. The buckskin calmed a little when she ran a hand over his nose and let him smell her, all the time talking in his ear to soothe and gentle him out of panic.

She got him out of the stall and tried to pull him over to where she had left Packy. Her plan was to position herself between the two horses, holding on to their halters—she'd seen it in a movie somewhere—then charge out of the stable hanging between them. It would take a lot more than a lurker armed with a club to stop their progress once they got going.

But Buck had had enough of smoke and darkness. He wanted out. When Cynthia tried to pull him sideways toward Packy, the gelding tossed his head so hard and suddenly that she was almost jerked off her feet. The coarse sisal rope burned her palm and she involuntarily released it. Buck's hooves thumped on the floorboards, and he was gone.

Damn horses, said the cool part of her. Always let you down when you need them. But she could still do it with Packy. She crawled to the big horse, stood up to untie her from the post, then took a good grip on the halter strap. "Okay," she said, "let's go!"

But now there was nowhere to go. The gray oblong was shrinking. She heard the rumbling sound of the big door closing. The attacker was shutting them in.

Cynthia swore again, the same word Vic would use when he hit his thumb with a hammer. She got down on her hands and knees again, breathing the cooler, cleaner air on the floor.

Now what? she asked herself, but this time the answer didn't come from the calm, rational corner of her inner household. This time, the response rattled up from the part of her that had stepped forward and punched Gerald Mallanger, the angry part of her that she had kept hidden, even from herself, like a dangerously deranged auntie locked in the basement for too many years.

A welling, rising, towering rage roared straight up out of the core of Cynthia Maidstone, filling her with a cold, crackling energy so intense she felt that she could point her fingers and chill lighting would coruscate from their tips.

A part of her was asking, Where did this come from? But she knew the answer. It came from the damned horse that balked at the water jump in the national tryouts; from the damned sweet husband who'd died and left her with all this life yet to live; from her damned sweet sons who'd wandered off into the world with scarcely a backward glance; from the talentless teenagers she had to teach; from rubbing up against the Mallangers and Finshaws and all the other well-fed barracudas that continually circled the Fairlawn Country Club, ready to tear into any tiny wound that leaked a smell of weakness into the social pond.

She should have recognized the signs when she'd popped Gerald in the nose, or when she'd gone along with playing at being hired muscle. Somewhere down inside her, sealed away, was one hell of a sense of grievance. She'd been standing on its head for a long, long time, and now it wanted out, just the way Buck had wanted out of the stable. It wanted someone to hit back at, someone who could be made to pay for what life had done to Cynthia Maidstone.

And somewhere in this dark, stinking stable, armed with a mere club, was the son of a bitch who had volunteered for the position.

"All right, then," she whispered, already crawling to the empty stall where she'd thrown the fire extinguisher. She felt around and found the cylinder, then dragged it back to the washtub. A few seconds of chilled carbon dioxide and the fire was out, though the smoke was just as dense.

She crawled to Philemon's stall, a plan putting itself together as she moved. The part of her that reflected on her thoughts commented on the iciness of her rage, but the rest of her was too busy to discuss it.

The attacker had been in the thick of the smoke before Cynthia arrived, yet she hadn't heard a cough. Gas mask, she thought. That means I can't find him by listening, the way he can find me, so I'll have to bring him to me.

She felt her way along the trembling length of Philemon. The thoroughbred was making less noise now—not because he was calmer, but because he had entered the stock-still, quivering-all-over stage of horse panic, his entire weight hauling backwards against the rope and the iron ring that tied him to the wall.

He wasn't going to calm down soon, Cynthia knew. That was all right. She didn't want him calm.

She took hold of the end of the tethering rope. It hung loose from the ring, tied in a quick-release knot that would come open if she yanked down suddenly. She squatted down in a corner of the stall and listened. She heard only the stamping of Packy's giant

hooves on the floorboards by the big door and the snuffling of her breathing. The big mare must have found a gap between the door and the jamb, and was sucking fresh air through the opening.

Cynthia could hear no sound from the attacker, but she knew he was there, waiting for her to move to one of the doors. Or for a cough that would tell him where she was hiding.

The smoke was thinner now. There were vents in the roof peaks that would let it dissipate. If it got any thinner, the attacker could find her just by turning the lights back on and looking around. It was time to act.

Squatting in the corner, Cynthia spoke firmly into the darkness. "Police," she said, then counted five seconds before she continued, "This is Cynthia Maidstone, 1204 Argyle Road. There's a man trying to kill me and burn down my stable. Send the fire department too."

She waited another couple of seconds then called out, "I've called 911. The police are on their way. If you're going to run, now's the time to do it."

But the observer part of her knew she didn't want the attacker to run, didn't care whether or not he believed she had a cellular phone. She wanted him to follow the sound of her voice, to come sneaking through the blackness.

"I'm not kidding," she said, and listened. And heard what she'd been listening for. The sound was faint, a tiny creak that was almost smothered by Packy's snorts and the air whistling through Philemon's distended nostrils. But she heard it again, a shrilly complaining floorboard, in just the right place.

She yanked down sharply on the gelding's tether and immediately let go. The rope unknotted from around the iron ring, and the tall thoroughbred stumbled backwards into the aisle between the stalls.

Cynthia heard a gasp and a whine as Misty Caouette's high-strung jumper blundered around in the darkness, desperate for a way out. But those were not horse noises. They came from the person who had been standing immediately behind Philemon when Cynthia loosed the terrified animal like a bolt from a catapult, the person who was now down on the floor getting a thorough acquaintance with the gelding's hooves.

Cynthia didn't wait to assess the damage. Ducking low, she scuttled to the big door, worked the handle, and threw it wide, then got out of the way as Packy and Philemon made their clattering exit. The horses ran to join Buck in the south field, while the woman took only twelve strides to reach the door of the house.

She slammed it closed behind her, grabbed the portable phone

from beside the kitchen door, and locked herself in the downstairs bathroom. There, crouched in the bathtub, the shower curtain drawn, she dialed 911 and repeated to the police operator who answered what she had said to the darkness of the stable.

One of the advantages of living on the right side of town was the rapid response time of the Oakleigh Police Department. In less than five minutes, Cynthia saw blue light strobing through the bathroom window. She made her way to the side door and looked out to see two police cars in the yard, and four uniformed officers with guns drawn edging toward the stable door.

A gray Mercedes came up the driveway. Cynthia saw two of the cops turn and put their guns on its driver. Taylor Finshaw got out with both hands raised, his face contriving an expression of jovial disbelief at the idea that anyone could think him a criminal.

He gave his name and said, "I live nearby. I was on my way home and saw the commotion. Everything all right with Cynthia?"

"Just fine," said Cynthia, stepping onto the porch, in a voice that sounded steadier than she felt. She watched him react, then saw him cover up that first reaction. She knew that his arrival was no coincidence. Whoever was in the barn had been sent by Taylor Finshaw. Unable to resist a chance to gloat, he had come to see Cynthia carried off to the hospital, perhaps to the morgue.

But now he didn't know how this was going to turn out at all, and from the way he clenched his fists behind his back, she knew that there was a growing worry behind the facade of neighborly concern.

The police returned their attention to the stable. One of them shouted into the smoky darkness, "Come on out of there! Hands where we can see them!"

The response from inside was muffled. Cynthia couldn't make out words, but the pain and panic in the voice were real. She saw Taylor swallow, and now there was sweat on his forehead, even in the coolness of the September night.

Two police officers went into the stable. Seconds later, one of them came out with his gun holstered. "We're clear," he said. "You two help get the perp outta there. I'm calling the paramedics."

In his hand he held a two-foot length of wood, a two by four roughly whittled at one end to make a hand grip. Into the other end was nailed a steel horseshoe. He set it on the passenger seat of one of the police cars and leaned into the open door for the radio mike.

Now the pieces were falling into place for Cynthia. It was not hard to see how this was supposed to have gone: the club was intended to make her look like a stable owner who had been

kicked and trampled unconscious while rescuing horses from a fire. And maybe she'd have been left to burn.

She crossed the yard to where Finshaw still stood, trying to see into the stable. "You bastard," she said.

"I didn't know anything," he answered, not taking his eyes off the darkened doorway. Then he swallowed and said, "It was all her own idea."

His last words stopped the tirade that had been lining up in Cynthia's speech center. "*Her* idea?" she said. She followed his gaze. Limping into the stable yard, borne between two police officers the way Cynthia had meant to hang between her horses, was a slim figure in jeans and a leather jacket, head bowed in pain. The third policeman came behind, carrying a military surplus gas mask.

"Looks like just a busted leg and maybe a couple of ribs," said the policeman who had radioed for an ambulance. He got out his notebook and approached Taylor Finshaw. "Are you acquainted with the suspect?" he asked.

"She's my daughter, Frisia."

"My God," said Cynthia. "You would use your own daughter? She could have been killed! How do people like you manage to live with themselves?"

The officer looked at her, but spoke to Finshaw. "When you say, 'It was all her own idea,' does that mean you were aware of her intentions in coming here tonight?"

Taylor Finshaw pulled at least some of his customary poise back into position. "That's ridiculous," he declared.

The policeman had an undeveloped sense of the ridiculous. He took a small card from his breast pocket and began to read from it. "You have the right to remain silent."

Frisia Finshaw told the judge it was all her own idea. She said it several times, elaborating on how she hadn't wanted to take riding lessons from Cynthia, who'd once threatened her with violence. She'd only wanted to scare her, she said, and now she was so very sorry things had got out of hand.

She pled guilty to assault and mischief, and was put on probation.

A few days later, it was her father's turn. The prosecutor drew what Cynthia found to be a convincing picture of a nasty, frightened man who enlisted his own daughter to commit serious crimes. But by the time the rich-voiced silverback from the Finshaw family's law firm was finished, Taylor had metamorphosed into a deeply concerned parent who, worried that his excitable, horse-shy daughter might be about to do something

rash, had come looking for her at Cynthia's place—regrettably arriving just a little too late to prevent the girl from acting out her teenage fantasies.

"My God," whispered Dodi Mallanger at the back of the courtroom, when the judge dismissed the charges on the grounds of insufficient evidence. "He let his own daughter take the fall."

"Take the fall?" said Cynthia. "You're still reading too many mysteries, Dodi."

Marion Caouette moved her lips into an arrangement that made a silent but eloquent commentary on the blindness of justice. Misty had already reported that, as soon as the cast came off, Frisia would be departing on a six-month tour of Europe, her parents having recently reversed a longstanding refusal to let the girl roam the Old World unattended.

"They really could get away with murder," Dodi said.

"Come on," said Cynthia. They went out into the hallway, accompanied by four other members of the new club that the three friends had organized since leaving the Fairlawn. In total, there were now more than two dozen women in MUSCL, the Mutual Support Club. None had been chosen for her social prominence, but all had been selected for their robust constitutions and for favoring a direct approach to resolving some of life's inequalities.

The seven women walked a few yards to a small room where lawyers could meet privately with their clients. They already knew it was soundproofed and could be locked from the inside.

"Someone lower the blinds," Cynthia said when they had entered and made sure the room was still free. She turned to Dodi. "Do you have the daffodil?"

"And the glue," her best friend confirmed.

Marion held up a Polaroid camera and smiled.

"Here he comes," said one of the new recruits, who had been keeping an eye on the hallway.

Cynthia took a deep breath, reached into that once hidden part of herself that she was now increasingly more comfortable with, and said, "All right, ladies. One, two, three—just the way we practiced it."

Together they stepped into the hallway. Finshaw blinked as they smoothly surrounded him and diverted his course.

"Taylor," Cynthia said; as they hustled him out of sight, "I wonder if I might have a word." 🐦

DEATH OF A GEMINI

BRENDAN DUBOIS

And then it came to this, as Navy Lieutenant Commander Scott Hanson maneuvered his F-14 Tomcat, following the light wands of the man in the yellow shirt standing on the flight deck, guiding him along. All around him on these acres of steel was the intricate and deadly ballet of night operations, but Hanson kept focused on the yellow shirt as he taxied his way to the number three steam catapult of the aircraft carrier. All things considered, he knew he should not be here on this night in the Arabian Sea preparing to go north over Afghanistan and deliver some serious steel to the Taliban and Al Qaeda. If the skipper, his squadron commanding officer, and the flight surgeon knew what was really going on with him, he'd either be in his bunk reading a week-old *New York Times*, or he'd be getting prepped to be sent stateside, where troubled pilots ended up, especially troubled pilots who were going nuts.

The jet blast deflector on the deck before him lowered down, as the F-14 in front of him clawed its way into the sky, its afterburners making a hell of an impressive light show. It was now his turn. He kept his eye on the yellow shirt, followed his signals to spread his jet's wings and lower the flaps. He kept his F-14 moving into the area known as the box, where the jet stopped in the catapult holdback with a familiar *clunk*. Stop it, he thought. Nobody knows a damn thing about anything and that was right. Tonight's mission was going to go off on schedule, problem or no problem, nuts or no nuts.

The yellow shirt crossed his light wands. He was at the point in the catapult track where the catapult shuttle was going to be attached to the launch bar on the nose landing gear. Just seconds to go. Hanson flexed his fingers in his gloves, breathed slowly through his oxygen mask, and kept his eyes fixed on the yellow shirt before him. It was a moonless night, not the preferred kind

of night to fly this kind of mission. It was always nice to have some added illumination out there. He glanced inside to the dials and readouts before him, and to the photograph stuck in one corner. His wife Paula, smiling over at him. Paula, safe and at home in Norfolk, seven months along with their first child. He touched the photo for a brief moment with one gloved finger.

Through the intercom came the voice of the man just feet behind him, his radar intercept officer, Lieutenant

John Chesterfield. "Let's have a good one, Han."

"You got it, Chewie," he said, and then was glad when Chewie shut up. He wasn't in the mood to talk, and his RIO was a good one for knowing his moods. Han and Chewie. There were odder call signs among the pilots and RIOs of his air wing, but to be compared to the crew of that *Star Wars* movie . . . well, it could have been worse. Funny thing was, his RIO took up chewing tobacco to make the name stick even more. Like he had pride in it or something.

All right, he thought. Keep focused. The yellow shirt looked left, then right, and gave the signal that tensioned the catapult, then signaled Hanson to increase the jet's engines to military power.

He felt the jet tremble as he pushed up the throttles at his left side. The yellow shirt turned him over to the catapult officer, who looked over the aircraft, making sure everything was fine. Wings out, flaps down, flight controls checked. His aircraft was vibrating and he could hear his breathing through the mask. His feet were on the rudder pedals, right hand on the stick, left hand on the throttles, jammed up against the military stops, the engines roaring behind him. The catapult officer, looking like a mechanized insect with helmet, goggles, ear protection, and float jacket, got the thumbs-up from the squadron troubleshooters, telling him the Tomcat was ready to go. Then the catapult officer looked straight at him and started waving his right hand around in a fast circular motion, the signal to go to afterburner. In his left hand, he held two lighted wands: one red, the other green.

Message understood, he said to himself, and pushed the throttle levers up, right up to the afterburner limit. The vibration increased and so did the steady roar of the twin General Electric jet engines back there. He looked at the readouts for both engines among the

Hanson spared a glance to the west.
Something heavy sunk in his chest, like
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clutter of the dials and instrumentation in the cockpit: nominal. Everything was fine.

The catapult officer got another thumbs-up from the squadron troubleshooters, meaning everything was fine outside the aircraft, and now the catapult officer wanted a message in return, and quick. Was everything okay inside the aircraft?

Hanson gave him a quick salute.

"Okay, Chewie, stand by," he said.

"Got it, Han."

There. The catapult officer hid his red wand behind his back and brought the green wand out front, signaling the catapult crew in the adjacent catwalk to pop the catapult and—

SLAM!

"Good shot, Chewie," he said, knowing the feel of a good catapult shot off the deck from the hundreds of previous launchings. There. Let the stick come back to that sweet spot, check the engines, check airspeed. One hundred fifty knots and increasing. Airborne, ten degrees nose up, gear up, flaps up, and landing gear up and locked. Throttle back out of the afterburner. Engines still fine. He headed off to port, to the base recovery course, as his RIO went to work.

"Tophat one-oh-three airborne," Chewie said.

"Roger that, one-oh-three," said the carrier's control tower.

He checked the airspeed, altitude, and heading. Time to get some altitude and hit an airborne tanker aircraft for a quick refuel. Then rendezvous with his wingman and then the strike package for tonight, before heading north. Away from the carrier and his problem, that big damn problem he hadn't told anybody about, not even his wife, and definitely not Chewie back there, who trusted him to get both of their asses off the carrier and back in one piece.

He tried not to move his head, tried to keep focused on just the flying before him, but it was impossible, like ignoring a college co-ed in your bunk, dressed in nothing but a wet T-shirt.

Dreading it, Hanson spared a quick glance left, off to the west, and felt something heavy sink in his chest, like they had lost power and were heading down to the unforgiving ocean.

On the horizon, shining and standing proud in all their glory, were the twin towers of the World Trade Center, where his younger brother had worked, and where his brother and so many thousands of others had died just over a month ago.

He looked away, stared ahead at the darkness and the stars, his hands and feet suddenly cold in the cockpit.

He had flown a dozen missions over Afghanistan, and except for

nights where there had been low cloud cover, every night he had seen the same thing.

The twin towers, out there on the horizon.

He took a breath. "You okay back there, Chewie?" he asked.

His RIO sounded surprised. "Yeah, Han. Starting the systems check. You okay?"

"Just fine," he said, hating the sound of the lie in his ears. "Just fine."

He had grown up in a small town on Long Island, in one of those long sweeps of suburbia that had spilled out from the cities after World War II. Dad worked at Grumman and Mom was a part-time secretary at the local school district.

He often wondered at what point growing up had he realized just how different his brother was. He guessed it had something to do with their bedrooms. Their home was a typical small Cape Cod, but he and Jack were fortunate enough to have their own sleeping spaces. He had always kept his neat and clean and ordered, with his paperback books on the shelf lined up just so, his sneakers in a row under his bed, and dirty clothes in the hamper.

But Jack's was different. Walking into his room meant dodging around piles of clothes, broken toys, and books all spread out, their spines broken. Once he had asked Jack why he didn't pick up after himself, and Jack had smiled that cocky smile of his and said, "Who's got time? There're better things to do."

Which meant trouble, most of the time.

He himself had managed to get through twelve years of elementary school and high school without once getting a detention slip, without once having to visit the principal's office. He had always been content to get good grades, play sports, and as he got older, hang out at the private airfield near home to watch the Cessnas and Cherokees and Piper Cubs slide so smoothly up to the sky. He knew that was where his future was, flying up in the air, free and with the whole world in front of him.

And Jack? Jack was lucky if he went twelve days without a stern note from a teacher, or an afternoon sweeping out classrooms or picking up litter on the school grounds. His grades were middle of the road, though a host of school counselors had always told Mom and Dad that Jack could do better if he would only apply himself. Jack's interests outside of school consisted of reading comic books—and playing pranks and tricks. Like putting soap under the door handles of the town's police cruisers. Or climbing up the Civil War statue in the town park to put a pair of pink panties on the statue's head. Or making ridiculous after-school phone calls to local businesses: "Good

afternoon, sir, I'm conducting a survey. Is your refrigerator running? It is? Then shouldn't you go and catch it?"

The worse of it was that every time he got into trouble, Jack never seemed to care. He'd just smile that sloppy smile of his, go through his punishment—no television, no dessert, no movies on the weekend—and start planning his next prank.

"My little trickster," Mom had said one day at a family barbecue in their small and neat backyard, rubbing his head as he stood next to her. "If he had been my first, he would have been my last."

And everybody in the crowd laughed, everybody in the crowd looked on in appreciation and amusement at the boy standing next to his mother, and that's when Scott Hanson realized he hated his younger brother Jack.

Flying north at fifteen thousand feet, Hanson let his oxygen mask come off and dangle across his chest. Everything was fine from the instrumentation; Chewie had just said that all his systems were up. In the darkness about him he could make out the position lights of the other F-14s in their strike package, heading out into the night to make war. Their lights would be doused once they got "feet dry" and they would rely on the data link in the cockpits for their positioning. His load this night was typical—one AIM-9 Sidewinder missile, one AIM-7 Sparrow missile, and two GBU-16 laser guided bombs—and so was the mission. At a certain point while "feet wet" they would report in to whatever AWACS aircraft was controlling that section of the battlefield over Afghanistan—known as the kill box—and then they would start flying holes in the sky once they got there. Going around in circles, waiting and waiting, until some target emerged worth hitting. It had been amazing, really, the dropoff in the number of targets. Some aircraft were actually coming back to the carriers without having expended a single piece of ordnance. He remembered reading something from the ship's newspaper, quoting Rummy back there in Washington. Some smart aleck reporter had asked Rummy whether he was concerned that the military was running out of targets to strike in Afghanistan. And Rummy, just eating that reporter for lunch, like so many times before, had said, "We're not running out of targets. Afghanistan is."

That wasn't a mystery, going after a target-poor environment like that poor benighted place, beaten up and destroyed by the Soviets, by civil war, and then by the Taliban, who seemed convinced it was their God-given right and duty to drag everybody back to the joys of the sixth century—not to mention Al Qaeda,

like some patient and malevolent bacteria, seeking a host of such decay and filth in order to survive and breed. What a place.

And speaking of mysteries, he spared another quick glance to the western horizon. Pure, sweet blackness. Not a single light.

Now, why did he, and only he, see those damn twin towers out there on the horizon, and only after launch and just before recovery? That was a mystery for the ages.

And he hated mysteries.

Of course, one of the greatest mysteries in his life was how Mom and Dad had produced two such utterly different children, and only eleven months apart. Another family joke: his birthday was in January and Jack's was in December, and in their neighborhood and among their relatives, they were known as Irish twins. My little Geminis, Mom would say, and he always knew that even with the scant year age difference between them, they were not best buds. In fact, they barely tolerated each other. One day, when he was thirteen or fourteen, Dad had told him how proud he was that the two of them had never really fought each other. That was always my problem, Dad had said, beating up or getting beaten up by my brothers. I'm so glad you and Jack get along so well.

Even at that tender age, he wasn't an idiot. He just nodded and said something dumb. Long ago the boys had settled into an arrangement where they did their own things, led their own lives, and if sometimes they had to share the backseat of the car, with Mom and Dad up front, well, that was fine.

They weren't friends and would never be friends, and that was the way of the world.

Forever.

Hanson checked the time to go before the next waypoint. A few minutes ago they had gone up to a KC-135 to top off their tanks before going feet dry, and now they were over soil, the Arabian Sea behind them. He looked down at the barren landscape and saw the scattered lights that belonged to their ally this season, Pakistan. Farther north was the moonscape of Afghanistan, and the few lights in Afghanistan made Pakistan look like the Northeast Corridor of the United States.

Lights. He remembered how it all began, last month. He had been in his tiny stateroom, which he shared with another lieutenant commander, Dave Barnes. It had been a September evening, deployment was over, and they were heading home, would be flying off in just a handful of days, and he was sorting through

his belongings, trying to decide what to pack and what to dump overboard, when Dave came in, eyes wide, breathing hard. "Gotta see what's going on, Han. Just gotta." And without a word, he followed him to the squadron's ready room.

There, clustered around a television set, he and so many others stood stock-still, practically shoulder to shoulder, watching a war begin in their homeland, against civilians thousands of miles away. At first he stood there, feet seemingly welded to the deckplate, as he watched the television replay the horrid scenes over and over again. His mind could not accept what he was seeing up on the screen, it had to be a movie, had to be something fake, like the old *War of the Worlds* radio show that caused a panic back in 1938. But within a flash of seconds, it came to him, what was really going on. His hands felt tingly, like they should be holding a weapon, should be around somebody's throat.

Look at that, someone had whispered in awe. Look what those bastards did.

And that had been his first thought, the gut-wrenching obscenity of taking an aircraft, a precision instrument of such grace and beauty, and using it as such a weapon. Seeing the airliner plow into the side of one of the towers made him physically nauseous.

Then a hand was placed on his shoulder.

"Sorry, Han," somebody said. "Your brother . . . he probably got out, you know? CNN says lots of people got out."

His brother. Working in an investment firm in the first tower that got hit. Old Jack, the trickster. He was embarrassed that while watching the towers burn he had not thought of his brother.

Sure, he thought, he got out. He got out of everything. That was his trickster's skills.

Then the deckplate started vibrating, a deep shuddering that went through their feet and up their legs. The faces of the pilots and the officers and the others looked around at each other, eyes wide, faces set.

"We're turning," a voice said.

"Not going home, are we."

"Guess this cruise just got extended."

Barnes crossed his arms, looked up at the burning twin towers on the television. "Guys," he had said, "get ready. We're going to war."

A funny war, this. Going around in circles, plowing holes in the air. Hold, hold, hold, sometimes chattering a bit with his wingman out there in the darkness, another F-14 piloted from his squadron.

The first handful of missions had been straightforward and right-on, knowing which targets to strike, how to get in and how to get out. But now that some Allied and Northern Alliance troops were on the move down there, and some of the towns and cities had already fallen, their bombing missions had changed. Wait, wait, wait, listening for some controller in the AWACS out there to punch your name up and give you coordinates for an emerging target.

He looked down at the landscape, at the snowy peaks, at the very few lights down there. The beach, that's what Afghanistan was now called. The beach. At times like these, with his RIO Chewie behind him doing whatever a backseat guy did to keep his mind occupied when there was no real threat out there, Hanson would look down and just let his mind drift a bit. He wondered what the Taliban and Al Qaeda must think, hunkered in, listening to the sounds of the jet engines overhead, seeing the explosions, feeling the shock waves, and gazing up at the night sky, trying to see the shadows of the overhead strike aircraft. Hanson thought that, despite all their bravado and fierce words of resistance and jihad, they must be terrified. They were familiar with enemies who fought on their terms, across fields or valleys, using AKs or mortars or the occasional tank. How could they have imagined what serious and heavy firepower would rain upon them after the attack on the Pentagon and the collapse of the World Trade Center? Opinions and views, everybody had opinions and views, and Hanson was sure that their view of the States was that of pure decadence, as seen in music videos and fashions, action movies and television shows, and high-priced entertainers. All sugar, all cotton candy, but nothing there to push back if prodded.

Hanson wondered whether if those frightened men on the ground had just come to the States for a little tour and had seen Cemetery Ridge and the USS *Arizona* and the Iwo Jima memorials, they might have thought twice before doing what they did.

He checked the fuel totalizer. He was getting down to his combat package fuel level. Before contacting the wingman, he toggled the intercom switch.

"You awake back there, Chewie?"

"You got it, Han."

"Time to find another gas station. Need anything?"

Chewie sighed. "Just used up my piddle pack, and I sure wish this gas station had restrooms, Han."

Hanson chuckled and set his F-14 on a heading to intercept a KC-135 refueling aircraft orbiting somewhere out in the darkness.

"We all got wishes tonight, bud."



And one wish had been that Jack had gotten out before his tower had collapsed, that Jack the trickster would have one more story about getting free and away, but that wish hadn't come true. Through strained, brief phone conversations with Mom and Dad and his wife Paula, the hard truth had come out after just a few days: few people from Jack's firm made it out alive. From the news reports he learned that the first hijacked airliner had slammed right into the floor where Jack worked.

The trickster hadn't made it out after all.

But Mom, good old Mom, had said through the tears and sobs that she was hopeful that a body would be found, a body so that a proper and good burial could take place. He didn't have the heart to tell her what he had known right from the start, from his own rough experience serving in the Navy, that when a body came in contact with a sudden explosion and dousing of burning aviation fuel, what emerged from that would look like a charred piece of fowl, arms and legs burnt away, the body curved up in a fetal position, as if the cells inside, sensing death coming their way, were trying to escape by reverting back to the womb.

And that was if you were lucky. And the trickster's luck had run out that September morning, for the combined impact and burning and collapse of over a hundred stories of steel and concrete and wires and windows and office desks and telephones and computers into a pile of rubble five or six stories high meant his brother was probably just dust, dust floating over what was now called Ground Zero.

In the days after September 11, he had gone through the motions, had done some training flights, had worked with others in determining the Taliban's order of battle, weaponeering potential targets in Afghanistan, coming up with strike package compositions and tanker requirements. He had focused on the upcoming mission and what was about to happen, so focused and determined that he grew increasingly irritated at all the interruptions that came his way and threatened to get him off the mindset that had to be there when you were about to strap yourself in and fly yourself into harm's way.

And of course, all of those damn interruptions had the Trickster's fingerprints attached to them. Once word got round that his brother had been in one of the twin towers, it seemed he couldn't get from one compartment to another in the damn ship without somebody stopping him to offer his or her condolences. Oh, he knew they were just being sympathetic, but in a place like the carrier, which had a population approaching that of the small town

he and Jack had grown up in, it meant a lot of standing still and nodding and saying all the right words. And then the heavies wanted to check in on him, from his skipper to the air group commander (known as the CAG) to the captain of the ship and the admiral of the whole damn battle group—not to mention the chaplain sniffing around to see if Hanson was up to doing the job. Then word came to him through his roommate that a public affairs officer was getting interview requests from the news media. They all wanted to interview the grieving F-14 pilot who was days away from going up to Afghanistan to wreak revenge and justice on behalf of his brother and their wounded nation.

Some grieving. He had yet to shed a tear for his dead brother. He had told Barnes to send word back that any reporter or film crew that came within earshot or eyeshot would have a length of tie-down chain wrapped around their necks and be dumped into the Arabian Sea.

The word got out. The condolences, the scrawled messages, the knowing glances sent his way as he went about his job all stopped, which was good, for he was one busy guy, getting ready to do what he trained all these years to do. All those years of flying and testing and studying and evaluating—from learning to fly to learning to fly jets to learning to take off and land jets from a few acres of heaving and moving steel—the big payoff was finally coming down to that one night in October, when he and Chewie had taken their place on the catapult track.

He could not remember feeling so wired before a mission. During their mission briefing an hour or so ago, the CAG had said a few words, yet he could not remember the exact phrasings. All he could remember was the tone of the talk. These people had come to our home and had killed our family. That was unacceptable. It was payback time. And the damn thing was, he still didn't put his brother's face to what had happened. It was just seeing the towers collapsing, the gaping hole in the Pentagon, and the burning field in Pennsylvania that set him going.

That first night Chewie had said to him, just before the launch, "Hey, Han. Let's go get some." And he had replied simply, "Roger that."

Then everything had gone like clockwork. Bing, bang, zoom, and when he was arcing out over the ocean, heading for the rendezvous point, happy that the mission had started and that all his weapons systems had checked out perfectly, that's when it had happened for the first goddamn time.

He looked, speechless and frozen for long seconds, as he saw

them, real as life, just up over the horizon's edge: The twin towers of the World Trade Center.

So far, Hanson thought, this mission was going to be their first bust, going out and flying circles and coming back without having dropped a damn thing. They had plenty of fuel but they were running out of time. With about five hours in the cockpit, strapped in and going around in big circles over the Afghan moonscape, the time limit for this mission was almost over. It would be time to head south to make their recovery time at the ship, and let the Air Force boys hog most of the daylight hours.

He was going to say something to Chewie back there, about what they might eat once they got back on the carrier, when a message suddenly crackled through his earphones: "Tophat one-oh-three, Skychief One."

Skychief One. The AWACS aircraft managing this kill box. Heart thumping, mouth suddenly dry, he listened as Chewie worked the microphone. "Skychief One, Tophat one-oh-three, go"

A pause, the hiss of static. "Tophat one-oh-three, switch channel nineteen."

"Roger, channel nineteen."

Chewie rotated the frequency knob, and Hanson heard him say, "Tophat one-oh-three's up."

The AWACS quickly responded. "Tophat one-oh-three, we have an emerging target. Your FAC is Tango Twelve. Stand by."

He waited, trying not to wonder, trying not to think of what was about to happen, just to keep focused. He knew from past missions that Tango Twelve was a forward air control unit on the ground, maybe Special Forces, maybe SEAL or even Delta Force itself.

Then a burst of static and a different, fainter voice with a Southern accent. "Hey there, Tophat, Tango Twelve."

"Roger, Tango Twelve," Hanson said in reply, smiling behind his oxygen mask, taking over for a moment from Chewie. "Something good on the menu tonight?"

Tango Twelve laughed through the static. "Hell yes, Tophat, we might have some crispy critters, if you're ready to supply the barbecue sauce. Ready for the brief?"

"Affirmative, Tango Twelve."

"All right, then, let's do it," said the Southern voice, now hard and harsh, full of strength and venom, as he read out the standard briefing items, and Hanson found himself wondering, just for a moment, how in hell the South had lost the Civil War.



The first time he thought it was a funny reflection or mirage from his cockpit instrumentation on the canopy, but no, that wasn't it. And he was about to ask Chewie back there if he saw anything strange out on the horizon over the Arabian Sea, like lights belonging to two American icons that were now mounds of smoldering rubble, but he caught himself before saying a damn thing.

And of course he would. What would happen if he were to ask Chewie about the lights on the horizon, Chewie replying, puzzled, "What lights do you mean, Han?" And how long before word would percolate back to the squadron skipper and the CAG and the flight surgeon about one of their F-14 pilots seeing strange visions out there in the darkness? He'd have a down chit in his hands so quick his head would spin, and he'd be off flight status and sent home as soon as possible. Jesus! That was not going to happen. Not after the days and weeks and months of training, of late nights and missed weekends, of hanging his butt over the edge so often that it had calluses back there. No, he was not going to do or say anything that would jeopardize his flight status.

So on that first night and the others, each time he launched and recovered aboard the carrier, he would spare a glance out to the western horizon, where he saw the twin towers, and he would not say a word about it to anyone. He had a job to do, by God, and he was going to do it.

Even if he was going nuts.

And tonight, this job was another bombing mission. The delivery and coordination information was straightforward; he was using the LANTIRN upgrade that made the F-14 into a damn fine nighttime precision bomber—some clowns called them Bombcats instead of Tomcats. Earlier, after Tango Twelve had given him the coordinates and the location ("Up that dry riverbank, we'll be designatin' the cave openin' on the east side."), that Southern good ol' boy had said, "You boys be safe and have good huntin', you hear?"

Be safe! Even Chewie had laughed over that one, for this particular war didn't call for most of the skills of the poor RIOs. They didn't have to worry about SAMs or MiGs or any other big-time threat. Just the occasional triple-A and small-arms fire and maybe, just maybe, a shoulder-launched missile fired aimlessly up into the sky like a bottle rocket. But to have this poor groundpounder down there, riding a horse, probably, freezing his ass off and eating half-cooked goat and having the runs something awful, to wish him and Chewie luck—well, it made Hanson shake his head in wonder.

All right, he thought, looking at the screen in the cockpit that illuminated the terrain thousands of feet below him, follow the dry riverbed, just like Tango Twelve had pointed out. Just a few minutes ago, this particular unit on the ground had seen trucks roll into a cave that was believed to be a storage area for Taliban units still operating in this part of the beach.

There. Keep on flying, let Chewie back there handle the whole thing, keeping an eye on a bright dot of light from Tango Twelve, whose hand-held laser illuminated the cave opening. He wondered who was in there and if they sensed that something bad and nasty was about to visit. Sure, they probably had a guard or two posted at the cave entrance, but how do you guard against a laser beam?

"Target acquired," Chewie said, which was RIO-speak to keep smoothly tracking the weapons guidance systems back there. No jinking allowed. It seemed like Tango Twelve was doing a good job of keeping the target illuminated, nothing flickering or bouncing around.

Seconds away, he thought for a moment about what strange machinations had occurred to bring a Long Island boy to this desolate stretch of land, thousands of miles away from his homeland, to destroy things and to kill people.

And the funny thing was, of course, that he had seen the twin towers, at night when coming into LaGuardia Airport for his wedding last year. He had been in the window seat of a 767 passenger jet, seat belt fastened, looking out at the southern end of Manhattan, just taking in all those tall buildings, the two tallest ones dominating everything. They weren't particularly striking or beautiful, just big and overpowering. He remembered thinking about all the lights in those buildings and which one belonged to his brother Jack.

Jack. Actually working for a change. He had gone to a state college in New England, and after getting a degree in English (English! As if that was a career path to be chosen.), he had been a schoolteacher, bank clerk, schoolteacher again, fisherman for a while on a crab boat off Alaska, newspaper reporter, then bank clerk one more time to round things off.

But strange things had conspired and happened, such that Jack now had a job with an investment firm at the World Trade Center. Top of the world, he had said that weekend of Hanson's wedding to Paula. He and Jack had found themselves alone in the kitchen of their parents' house, warily staring at each other, each drinking from a bottle of Sam Adams.

"So," Jack had said with a cheery grin. His hair was carefully cut and styled, and he was dressed in a light pink polo shirt and khaki slacks. "Getting married."

"Yep," Hanson replied, leaning against the kitchen counter. "Unless she changes her mind or something."

"Thought all you flyboys didn't want to get settled down. Thought you wanted someone in every port. Or airfield. Or whatever."

Hanson just sipped from the beer and looked at the stranger across from him. How many Christmas and birthday cards had they exchanged once they had gone their separate ways? Four? Five, maybe?

"Then you thought wrong," he said finally. "And it wouldn't be the first time, right?"

Jack refused to take the bait. "Well, good luck, I guess."

"And what about you?" he asked. "Anybody out there for you?"

Jack's smile was still there. "If there is, she's hiding pretty well. No, big brother, right now, I'm just playing the field. And in Manhattan, the field is wide and deep, if you get my drift."

Hanson felt uncomfortable in the kitchen. Lots of meals prepared here, lots of dishes washed here. He remembered seeing TV sitcoms about brothers sharing fun and laughs and adventures in similar kitchens and similar homes, and he was surprised at how bitter he felt that the life in this little house had never been like a television show.

"Navy treating you okay?" Jack asked.

"Can't complain," he said.

"Sure you can," Jack said. "Must be something. You get used to being in one place, then, bam, you're told to pack up your bags and go somewhere else. How in hell can you do that?"

"Maybe because it's what I want to do," he had said. "Be part of a team. Do something for my country. That's what."

Jack stifled a laugh. "Sounds like a joke to me."

He could feel the back of his neck get warm. "You sure do know jokes, don't you."

That damn cocky smile. "Still mad about last night?"

Last night, at the family barbecue out back, he had tried to be friendly to his brother, tried at least to be civil and sociable, for Mom and Dad's sakes, at least. He had asked Jack what his job was like, and Jack started going on and on about how his firm secured investments for start-up companies and new technologies, such as a bit of software that was built into roller skates and linked to a GPS satellite overhead, so someone could put on the roller skates and with a hand-held Palm Pilot receive signals from the satellite.

Because of the accuracy of the GPS signal measuring the placement and motion of the feet, the person with the skates on his feet and the Palm Pilot in his hand could learn to rollerskate in an afternoon by using this complex piece of equipment. It took about fifteen minutes of talk on Jack's part, and some serious questions on his part, before he noticed people about him snickering and smiling, and he realized the trickster had struck again.

"What can I say," he said. "You can sling it pretty well, Jack. Must be something to be proud of."

"Life's too short, big bro, not to have some fun here and there. I'd think you'd know something about that, flying jets and all."

"Jack, the breadth and depth of what you don't know about me could fill a swimming pool."

His cocky younger brother was silent, and he was a minute away from finishing his beer and leaving the kitchen to find Paula.

"You know, Scott—" Jack's voice had a tinge of seriousness in it. "I always thought, you and me, growing up, that we should have—"

Then his parents roared in from the back yard, laughing and bringing in a slew of uncles and aunts and cousins, and the whole rhythm of the weekend was set, the rehearsal, the rehearsal dinner, and the day of the wedding itself, going out of the church in his dress whites, with his beaming wife at his side squeezing his arm. He never knew what Jack had in mind to say that moment in the kitchen.

So what, he had thought at the time. Jack could tell me some other time, that's what.

Some other time.

Time.

Chewie in his earphones: "Bomb away, Han." There was the quick lurch as the F-14 suddenly became a thousand pounds lighter, and he smoothly made the adjustment.

Chewie said, "Looks good, Han."

He felt a flash of righteous anger, something that would just come up in every mission, feeling that in his own little way, he and Chewie were just providing a bit of payback for what had happened last month. Here you go, you bastards, he thought. Here's a little taste. Hope you like it. Hanson kept flying, straight and level, knowing that what was going on down there was being recorded. Maybe, if he was lucky, Rummy or somebody else in the Pentagon in a couple of days could use this tape at some press conference and—

"Impact," Chewie called out. "Shit, that's a good one, Han."

He spared a glance down to the ground, at the rugged surface, saw the flare and blossom of light, followed quickly by more

bright blossoms of orange and red and white.

Chewie said, "Woo-hoo, look at the secondary explosions. Don't think they were storing dates in that cave, do ya?"

"Not for a sec."

In his earphones, the good ol' boy was practically chortling. "Beautiful strike there, Tophat. Great work. That's a shack."

"Navy's always glad to lend a hand," Hanson sent back.

Another faint laugh. "Man, you ever end up at Bagram, look us up. We'll buy you a beer or three."

Another toggle of the microphone. "And you get your ass out on my boat, we'll do the same."

"Shit, not hardly," Tango Twelve said.

"Why?"

" 'Cause I'm afraid of the ocean, that's why."

Chewie laughed as well, and Hanson said in reply, "Thought you snake-eaters weren't scared of anything."

Now the voice was even fainter, as he gained distance and altitude from the now merrily burning cave. "Just another half-truth, bro. You be careful going home now, you hear?"

"You too, pal," he said, and there was no acknowledgement. He imagined the guys down there were busy shagging ass to get away from that target area. He flexed his hands again; they suddenly felt stiff. As he climbed out he checked his fuel state, noted the time, and said, "Chewie, whaddya say. Time to head home?"

"Sounds like a great idea to me, Han. Come left to one-seventy for the way point."

"Roger."

And he pointed their jet south, to the still dark sky and even darker ocean.

Home.

His home for the past months had been the small compartment he shared with Barnes, and during the first missions, he had found it hard to sleep, stretched out in his bunk, staring up at the metal nearly surrounding him. They were on a different schedule now, sleeping during the day—as if a good sleep was possible with the sounds of the blue shirts on the deck overhead, dragging and dropping chains, as well as the chatter from the P.A. system and the constant background hum of a metal home to six thousand people—and working at night, like some bunch of vampires.

In his bunk he had stared up at the metal bulkhead where he had pasted up a series of photos: several of Paula, one of the two of them on their wedding day, a couple of Mom and Dad, and there,

the sonogram that showed their baby getting ready to come to life in a very strange and now terrifying world. Most times the photos had brought him a sense of belonging, but for the past several days, ever since the strikes up to Afghanistan had started, the photos were no longer giving him comfort. They were bothering him, making him irritable and restless. Then it came to him rather simply. There were no photos of his only sibling, his dead brother Jack.

Not a one.

It never bothered him before, but since the missions had begun, it felt terribly wrong.

Hanson's back ached, his arms throbbed, and his hands were tired. Forget the launch, forget flying over enemy territory, the really dangerous part of any mission was the last three-quarters of a mile, trying to land at night on a moving piece of metal that had dozens of options available to end your life in a very messy and public way. They had gone through the same motions hundreds of times before, checking in with the strike controller, then the marshalling controller, who put them in a holding pattern over the ocean for a while. Then it was their turn, commencing their approach to the aircraft carrier, on time to the second. Soon they were "down the chute," as they say, until they were three-quarters of a mile out, calling the ball to the landing signals officers.

His eyes were moving constantly, checking his lineup, angle of attack, and the illuminated "meatball" on the deck of the carrier, checking to see if he was coming in too high or too low. So far he had been right in the center, lined up with the green lights on either side of the ball. Earlier the landing gear had come down, the flaps had come down, the tailhook had come down, all in preparation for getting his ass and Chewie's down too, safe on the deck. The landing signal officers on the carrier were watching him closely, ready to guide him if he started drifting or wave him off for another landing try if things got too hairy.

About a quarter mile out he could actually see objects on the flight deck coming right at him, and even though he was just seconds away from what was always called a controlled crash, he couldn't resist it. He made a quick movement of his head, looked off to the west, and there they were, lit up and ghostly, the twin sentinels of the World Trade Center, keeping an eye on him as he landed.

Just like before. A hell of a routine.

Before this last mission, in his bunk with the curtain drawn across, he had looked at the photos and thought, a month ago you

had a brother and now you don't. And what do you have to remember him by? Not a damn thing. Oh, eventually, after returning home, he'd ask Mom for a decent picture of Jack, so at least when their child grew up, he or she could learn something about Uncle Jack, a funny but irritating uncle who had died on the first day of what promised to be a very long and difficult war.

He had reached out and touched the photos one last time, before getting up and showering and getting dressed and heading for the briefing on the evening's mission.

That was the problem. There was nothing of his brother's aboard the ship in his belongings, and it came to him that despite all of the years of difficulties and silences and bad blood, that was not right.

Not right at all.

The best landings were the ones that came as a surprise, if you were focused on doing your job right, and that was true enough for Hanson as the jolt of his F-14 startled him. He felt the hard tug as the tailhook caught one of the four arresting wires spread across the deck, and he immediately threw the throttle to full power in case the tailhook slipped off, or—like what happened aboard the USS *Stennis* last spring—the damn tailhook got pulled away and the F-14 rolled down the angle deck and dribbled off the end, right into the ocean. Luckily, in that case, the pilot and the RIO managed to eject safely.

But this was a good ending. He felt the plane shudder to a halt. He powered down and Chewie said, "Another good one, Han." Then the whole post-flight routine kicked in. He raised up the tailhook and the flaps, started sweeping the wings back, and followed the signals of the yellow shirt in front of him, directing him and Chewie out of the way of the next incoming aircraft. He taxied off to the right, and in a few minutes of jockeying and de-arming the remaining ordnance on board, they were tied down and it was time to get out. The canopy came up and the smell of the salt air and aviation fuel swept in, and in a matter of seconds he was on the deck, the muscles in his legs and back protesting.

As they made their way down below, Chewie grinned and said, "Think we might see the footage of that strike on CNN?"

"Could be," he said. "Anything's possible."

"That's for sure. Hey, the lights out there were something, tonight, weren't they?"

He stopped so quickly that Chewie bumped into him. He turned sharply and said, "What?"

"The lights. Out on the horizon."

He could no longer hear the chatter of the P.A. system or the noises of the aircraft landing just overhead, or even the voices of the other personnel walking around them. All he could hear was what was coming out of his RIO's mouth.

"Lights? What lights?"

Chewie looked troubled, like he had fouled up or something. He said, "Those beams out there. It's some sort of long distance oil platform, belongs to Oman. They burn off the natural gas and you get these two plumes. Looks like searchlights or something. Come on, Han, you must have seen them."

He took a deep breath, felt his legs get wobbly. He forced a smile at his RIO and slapped him on the shoulder. "Sure," he said. "Sure, I've seen them. Look. I'll be along in a bit for the debrief. I've got something to do."

"You got it, Han," Chewie said, leaving him alone, and Hanson shook his head and headed down to the hangar deck. There were procedures to follow, places to go, and the all-important debrief to be held, but something else had just come to the surface, and he had to see it through.

On the hangar deck, among the aircraft and maintenance shops, the noise was different, and it sounded like most of the evening's strike aircraft had been recovered. He made his way aft to a starboard side platform that jutted out over the water, borrowing a pair of 7x50 binoculars from a sailor on watch along the way.

On the edge of the metal, with the ocean churning below him almost three stories down, Hanson looked out to the western horizon and saw a faint glow. He picked up the binoculars and focused in on what he saw, knowing he had to work quickly before the predawn light faded everything out. He gently worked the focusing knob on the binoculars. There. Two plumes of light, reaching up. Flickering and orange. Not the World Trade Center. Just two burning plumes of gas. That's what he had been seeing all these nights during launch and recovery. Whether it had been a mirage or a wish fulfillment or a trick played on his eyes, it—

A trick.

That's what it had all been. A trick.

He lowered the binoculars, suddenly overwhelmed by the ache in his chest and the tears rolling down his cheeks, weeks overdue. He couldn't believe it, but he wanted to. God, how he wanted to believe it, and he stood there on the cold steel, tears still streaming, and as he turned and put the lights and horizon behind him, he cleared his throat and said something aloud.

"Good going, trickster," Hanson said to his brother. "You got me." 🐦

MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



AP Photo/Robert F. Bukaty

Torch Song?

We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "September Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

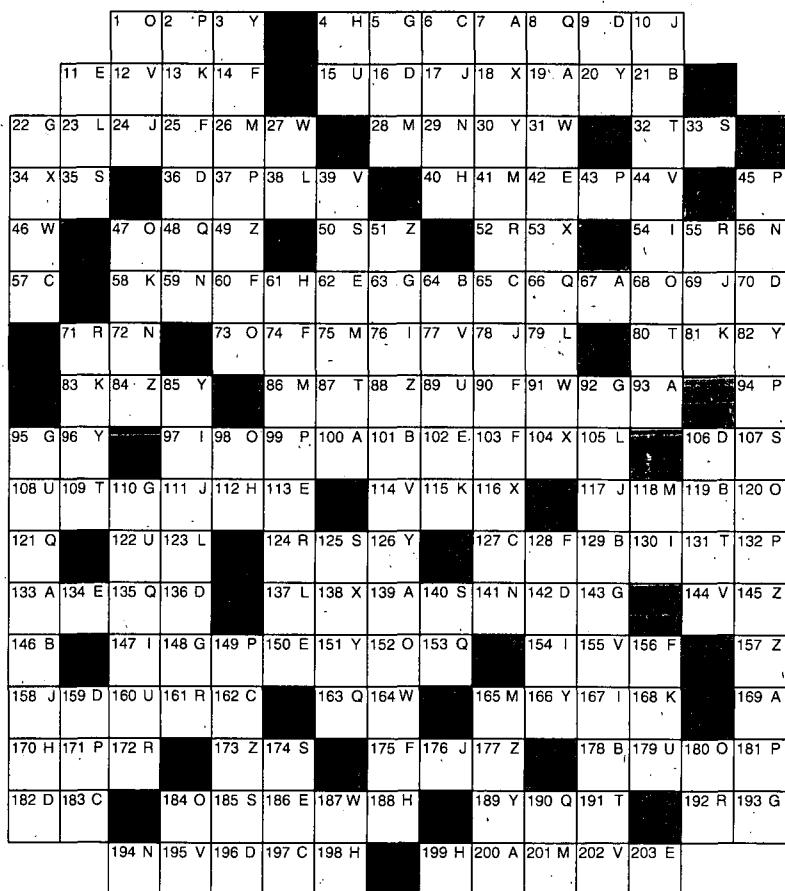
The winning entry for the March Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

DYING WORDS

ACROSTIC BY JACQUELINE E. MATHEWS



Using the definitions, fill in as many words as you can in the column on the right. Then transfer the letters to their corresponding places in the diagram. A black square in the diagram indicates the end of a word. When completed, the diagram will yield a quotation. The initial letters of the words in the righthand column spell out the name of the author and the work from which the quote was taken. The solution will appear in the October issue. The solution to last month's puzzle is on page 133.



DEFINITIONS

WORDS

A. Reacted to cold

200 67 139 133 169 19 93 100 7

B. Clupeid fish	<u>129</u>	<u>146</u>	<u>101</u>	<u>178</u>	<u>64</u>	<u>119</u>	<u>21</u>		
C. Southwest sights	<u>197</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>65</u>	<u>127</u>	<u>57</u>	<u>162</u>	<u>183</u>		
D. Bivalve concoction: 2 wds.	<u>159</u>	<u>16</u>	<u>70</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>106</u>	<u>142</u>	<u>136</u>	<u>182</u>	<u>196</u>
E. State economic panaceas	<u>150</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>62</u>	<u>102</u>	<u>186</u>	<u>203</u>	<u>42</u>	<u>134</u>	<u>113</u>
F. Xanthic	<u>156</u>	<u>90</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>60</u>	<u>74</u>	<u>175</u>	<u>103</u>	<u>25</u>	<u>128</u>
G. Fed	<u>148</u>	<u>110</u>	<u>193</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>63</u>	<u>143</u>	<u>95</u>	<u>92</u>	<u>22</u>
H. Batter creations: 2 wds.	<u>170</u>	<u>199</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>40</u>	<u>61</u>	<u>188</u>	<u>112</u>	<u>198</u>	
I. Like a wallflower, perhaps	<u>147</u>	<u>54</u>	<u>76</u>	<u>154</u>	<u>167</u>	<u>130</u>	<u>97</u>		
J. Gas up again, say	<u>111</u>	<u>158</u>	<u>69</u>	<u>117</u>	<u>24</u>	<u>78</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>17</u>	<u>176</u>
K. Narrow passage	<u>168</u>	<u>115</u>	<u>58</u>	<u>81</u>	<u>13</u>	<u>83</u>			
L. Act carelessly, in a way	<u>123</u>	<u>23</u>	<u>137</u>	<u>79</u>	<u>105</u>	<u>38</u>			
M. Geometrid larva	<u>118</u>	<u>26</u>	<u>201</u>	<u>28</u>	<u>165</u>	<u>75</u>	<u>41</u>	<u>86</u>	
N. Less crummy: slang	<u>72</u>	<u>141</u>	<u>29</u>	<u>56</u>	<u>59</u>	<u>194</u>			
O. Last Tudor ruler	<u>120</u>	<u>73</u>	<u>68</u>	<u>152</u>	<u>180</u>	<u>184</u>	<u>98</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>47</u>
P. Rudimentary course	<u>149</u>	<u>181</u>	<u>37</u>	<u>94</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>43</u>	<u>171</u>	<u>99</u>	<u>45</u>
Q. Crucifer roots	<u>135</u>	<u>48</u>	<u>163</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>121</u>	<u>190</u>	<u>153</u>	<u>66</u>	
R. In an unheroic way	<u>124</u>	<u>55</u>	<u>192</u>	<u>71</u>	<u>52</u>	<u>161</u>	<u>172</u>		
S. Hardly apostate	<u>174</u>	<u>185</u>	<u>50</u>	<u>125</u>	<u>33</u>	<u>140</u>	<u>35</u>	<u>107</u>	
T. Off	<u>80</u>	<u>131</u>	<u>87</u>	<u>109</u>	<u>32</u>	<u>191</u>			
U. — up, finished	<u>15</u>	<u>122</u>	<u>160</u>	<u>108</u>	<u>179</u>	<u>89</u>			
V. Prepared to mount	<u>202</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>155</u>	<u>77</u>	<u>114</u>	<u>144</u>	<u>39</u>	<u>44</u>	<u>195</u>
W. Take turns	<u>91</u>	<u>164</u>	<u>46</u>	<u>187</u>	<u>27</u>	<u>31</u>			
X. Consecrate	<u>34</u>	<u>116</u>	<u>104</u>	<u>53</u>	<u>18</u>	<u>138</u>			
Y. Omnipresent	<u>126</u>	<u>30</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>82</u>	<u>151</u>	<u>189</u>	<u>166</u>	<u>96</u>	<u>20</u>
Z. Start of a Gershwin classic	<u>88</u>	<u>84</u>	<u>145</u>	<u>157</u>	<u>49</u>	<u>51</u>	<u>173</u>	<u>177</u>	

MAILBOX MAYHEM

SUSAN PAGE DAVIS

I didn't mean to smash the mailbox.

I was just getting out of the shower at five A.M., getting ready for my early shift at the police station, when the phone rang downstairs. My folks have never been too prosperous, so we didn't have telephone extensions in every room, like the Martins did. I wasn't dressed, so I let it ring. I figured Maman would rather be woken up at five o'clock than have me run for the phone in a towel.

Wrong.

"Paul Antoine, it's for you," she called sleepily up the stairwell, with a touch of grumpy on the side.

I grabbed a towel and stuck my head out the bathroom doorway.

"I'm getting dressed, Ma."

"Hurry up. It's Allen."

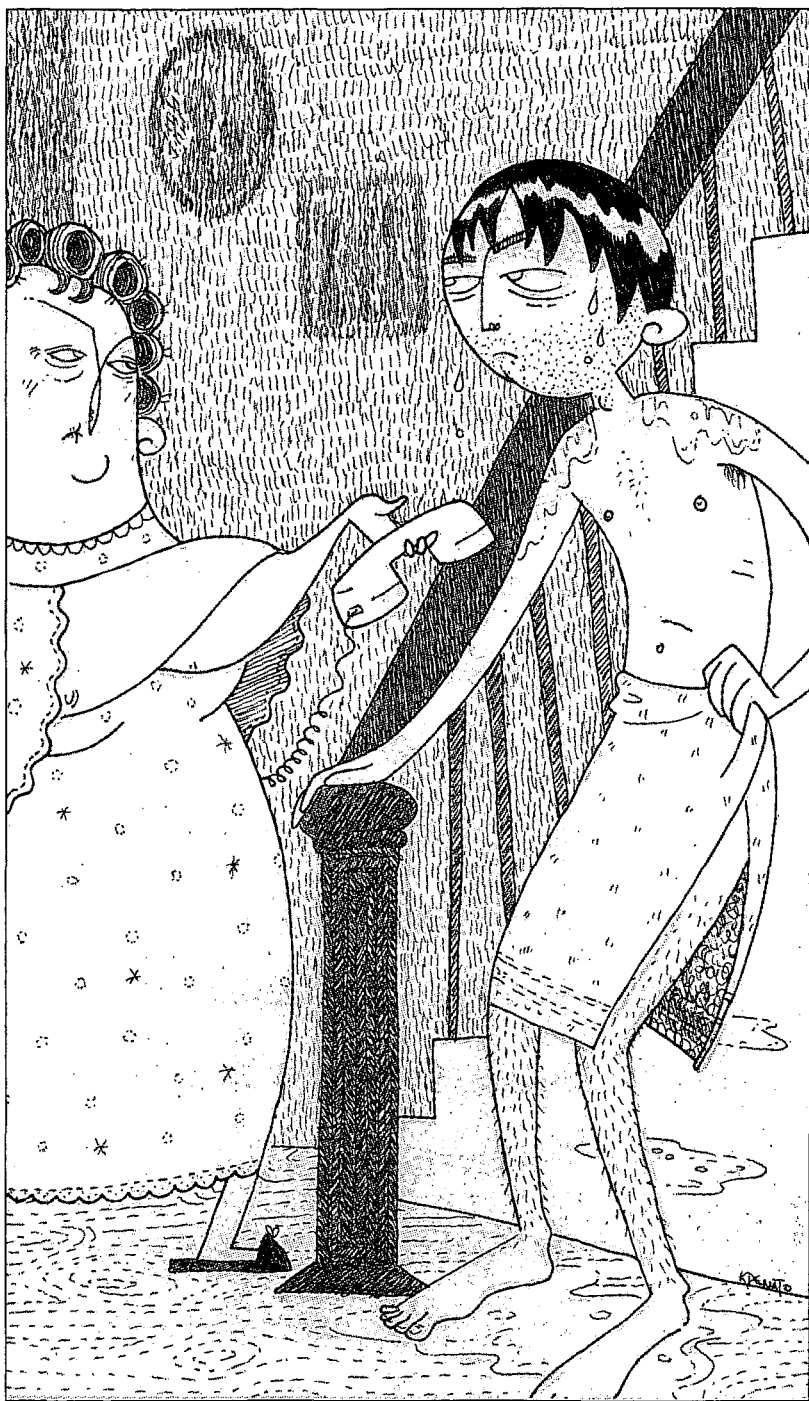
Maman always called him Allen, although he was All-Eyes to everyone else in town. His big brother Michaël started it, because Allen's eyes were so big and round when he was a baby that he seemed all eyes. And it stuck, all through school, and even our stint in the police academy. All-Eyes Martin and I signed up for criminal justice together. We were best friends, and we really didn't expect to be able to work together as adults, but it had worked out, and here we were, both sworn officers in the Waterville, Maine, police department for five years now.

I wrapped the towel around me and skipped down the stairs. Maman glared at me as she handed me the receiver.

"What is it?" I snapped into the phone, not looking at her.

"Homicide, *mon ami*. Pick me up. The detective sergeant will meet us there."

"The state police are handling it?"



"Of course, but we get to help." Our department was considered too small to investigate its own murders. It was standard for the state police to take over. Even though we resented it, we couldn't do anything about it.

I dashed back up the stairs and slammed my bedroom door. I could hear Maman yelling, "Paul Antoine Fournier! Pick up that wet towel!"

"We got a homicide, Ma," I yelled.

"Yeah? Well, that dead body won't go anywhere while you pick up after yourself."

I dressed as quickly as I could. All-Eyes had made detective six months before me, and that had been a sore point between us, especially since I had higher SAT scores than he did, and I was above him in class rank at the community college and the academy. But he'd passed the detectives' test with one more point than me, and there was only one opening at the time. Now I had finally gotten my promotion, and was about to help investigate my first homicide. The adrenaline was pumping as I clipped my badge on and buckled my shoulder holster.

Maman was waiting in the upstairs hall. She was wide awake now.

I tried to brush past her, but her arm shot out and she grabbed my wrist, holding me there without mercy.

"Hey! That hurts, Ma."

"Wet towels do not belong on wood floors, Detective."

I sighed and reached for the towel. "I gotta go pick up All-Eyes!"

"He can wait."

"Ma, this town hasn't had a murder for three years, and we're on it."

"Hang it up."

I didn't want to detour back to the bathroom, so I ran down the stairs and out the door, tossing the towel in the general direction of the porch railing, then bounded down the steps. My pickup was sitting in the paved driveway, and my sister's Neon was right behind it. My dad's car was in front of my truck, and Maman's minivan was in the dilapidated garage. Sometimes I thought I'd chosen the wrong profession and should have been a parking attendant. I ran back inside for Lisa's keys and moved her car, leaving the key ring on the floor under the front seat, then jumped in my truck and at last got under way.

That's when I backed into the mailbox.

I heard the crunch about the same time I felt the slight resistance beneath the back wheel. I hit the brake and jumped out. The mailbox was beyond repair. I let out a groan of frustration. At

least Maman wasn't staring at me from the front porch.

There was movement beside me, and I turned quickly. Although it was still early, Mr. Reynolds from down the street was up already. He had his malamute, Chumble, on a leash, and was walking him on the sidewalk.

"Too bad," he said, looking pointedly at the crumpled mailbox. "You should be more careful, Paul."

"Right," I muttered.

I tossed the mailbox in the back of my pickup. I could get one at the hardware store on my way home from work. I waved at Mr. Reynolds and headed for the Martins' house a couple of streets over.

It was All-Eyes who heard the call on the radio. We'd driven one of the unmarked cars the detectives use from the police station to the run-down apartment house where the homicide occurred. At first I was afraid I would just have to watch, but the sergeant put me right to work. We spent all morning doing legwork while the more senior detectives and the state troopers handled the evidence.

It was a straightforward case, no question of who did it. The wife had shot her husband and then calmly called the police. I was taking statements from the neighbors about the couple's nonstop arguing when All-Eyes called to me and motioned for me to join him by the car.

"What?" I asked, slightly annoyed at being interrupted.

"Dispatch just sent a unit to your house."

"My house?"

"Your house."

"You sure?"

All-Eyes scowled at me. "Of course I'm sure. 251 Hoffstead Street."

"That's my house."

"That's what I said, idiot."

"What's going on?"

"Not sure. Want me to call Andy and ask?"

"No." Andy was the dispatcher, but we weren't supposed to chitchat with him.

"Well, maybe we can take our lunch break and cruise by there," All-Eyes suggested.

Ten minutes later he pulled up in front of my house. A city patrol car was parked at the end of the driveway, and Officer Fred Norman was standing on the porch. I knew it was him, even back-to, because Fred is the extra large, economy size. I don't know how they found uniforms for him.

At first I thought maybe he was there to see Lisa, because I knew he thought Lisa was cute, but that didn't make sense. All-Eyes had heard the call on the radio, after all, and when I got out of the car I could see that Maman, not Lisa, was standing in the doorway talking to Fred.

All-Eyes followed me up the driveway.

"Hey, Fred. Maman, what's up?" I asked.

"Oh, a fat lot of good it does to have a detective living here." Anyone who doesn't know my family would think Maman didn't like me.

"What's wrong, Mrs. Fournier?" All-Eyes asked, giving her a smile that was friendly, concerned.

"Hello, Allen. That's a nice necktie," my mother said.

"Thank you. Is there a problem here?"

Maman threw up her hands. "Our mailbox was stolen."

My jaw almost hit the porch floor. Before I could say anything, Maman was off on a long spiel.

"Yes, Officer Norman says there's a lot of that in the residential neighborhoods lately. I didn't notice it was gone until Ed Bagly brought the mail around, and there was no box to put it in. He came up here and rang the bell and gave me the mail himself. Three bills, an L.L. Bean catalog, and a letter from your sister, Marie," she said, throwing me a glance. "I said, 'Ed, why didn't you put the mail in the mailbox?' and he said, 'What mailbox?' Just like that. And so I said—"

"Maman." I held up my hands. "We get the picture. I think perhaps I can help Fred with this little mystery."

"You can?" Fred asked. "That would be great, Paul, because we've had about a dozen calls this month on stolen mailboxes."

"Well, I don't know about that, but as to this particular mailbox—"

Before I could make my confession, Lisa appeared behind my mother, peering out at us.

"Hey, guys. Is this a cop convention?"

"Hello, Miss Fournier," Fred said, going kind of googly-eyed.

"Hey, kiddo," said All-Eyes. She hated it when he called her that, and that's why he'd done it for the last twelve years.

I was just about to try to get the conversation back on track with the mailbox thing when Lisa's eyes widened.

"Hey! Where's my car?"

Fred and All-Eyes turned and looked toward the driveway.

I said, "Oh, relax. I moved it this morning. I had to get out. I parked it over on the—" I stopped and stared at the empty patch

of grass at the edge of the lawn, where Lisa's car should have been. I could see where the tires had flattened the grass.

"Where?" she asked.

I swallowed hard. "Right there. It's gone."

"What do you mean, gone?" my mother asked.

"Gone," I repeated. "I left it there, beside the driveway."

"Someone hot-wired my car?" Lisa's voice rose in rage.

"Uh—" I gulped. "I sort of left the keys in it. Under the seat."

Lisa pushed past Maman and starting pummeling me with her fists. "You are so stupid!"

"Hey!" I raised my arms to protect my face, but All-Eyes pulled her off me.

"Settle down, kiddo. Do you want Fred to investigate an assault, a car theft, or a stolen mailbox?"

Lisa frowned at him, then stared out the driveway. "What happened to the mailbox?"

Ten minutes later, Fred was finishing up his paperwork.

"Are you sure Dad didn't move Lisa's car before he went to work?" I asked Maman.

"Absolutely not. I came right out here on the porch to kiss him good-bye. I never thought about her car not being there."

I sighed.

"Don't worry, Miss Fournier," Fred said.

"Lisa," my sister said.

"Lisa. We'll find your car." Fred's eyes held something like devotion.

"Relax, kiddo," said All-Eyes. "Probably Joey Bouchard saw Paul leave it there this morning and decided to take it for a test drive."

"That Joey," my mother snorted. "He's a troublemaker with too much time on his hands. I'll be glad when school starts again next week."

"He's an infant," Lisa protested.

"He's fifteen," said All-Eyes. "Maybe it was just too tempting, that red Neon of yours sitting there." He winked at Lisa and she laughed.

"Hey, are you guys on your lunch hour?" Fred seemed a little prickly.

"Yeah, we'd better be getting back," I said. "Keep us posted."

"If Fred can't find your car by the time we solve this homicide, we'll come give him a hand," All-Eyes said with a grin.

Fred frowned at him. "As if."

All-Eyes followed me jauntily down the driveway and we got

into the car. He was pulling out onto Hoffstead Street before I realized I hadn't told them where the mailbox was.

We'd barely gotten back to the murder scene when the detective sergeant called me over.

"Fournier, there's a new case in your neighborhood. I'm putting you and Martin on it."

"What? My sister's car?" I couldn't believe it. He was sending me back to look for Lisa's car instead of helping with the homicide.

"I don't know anything about a car," Sergeant Clark said with a frown. "This is a missing persons case. An old lady's missing from 296 Hoffstead. Her daughter just called it in, and I'm sending you two. You know the area."

"Old Mrs. Laplante," said All-Eyes.

I grimaced. "She's a little flaky and she wanders off, you know? She'll turn up. Can't they just send a patrolman over?"

"Sorry. There was a wreck on upper Main Street, and a lot of guys are up there. There's no one else available right now."

All-Eyes put his hand on my shoulder. "Come on, Paul. We'll go over and talk to Nancy. Chances are we'll straighten it out and get back here in no time."

"There's not that much left to do here, anyway," Sergeant Clark said. The medical examiner had come and gone, and the hearse had taken away the body.

In the car, I was still irritated. "This is the craziest day! We finally get to work on a homicide and it's the boringest murder on record. Then all of a sudden my neighborhood is a hotbed of crime. There's Lisa's car and Mrs. Laplante, not to mention running over the mailbox."

"Who ran over the mailbox?"

"I did, of course."

"Why didn't you say so?"

I glared at All-Eyes. "As if I had a chance."

"You had plenty of chances."

"I forgot after Lisa said her car was missing."

"Well, when your mother finds out, we may have another homicide to work on."

He turned at the corner of Hoffstead Street and stopped in front of Mrs. Laplante's house. Her daughter Nancy was waiting on the porch.

"Hello, boys." She smiled wearily. "I thought you'd never get here."

"Sorry, Nancy," I said sheepishly. "We were working on a homicide."

Her eyebrows shot up. "Really? I'm sorry to take you away from that."

All-Eyes stepped up, smiling. "It's all right, ma'am. We're here to help you any way we can. Now, what's the story on your mother?"

"Well, I went to work this morning as usual, and she seemed fine. I know she's been a little disoriented, but she's usually all right. Mrs. Woods next door looks in on her for me and gives her the medication." She shook her head. "I've been trying to find a spot for Mom in a long-term care home, but the waiting lists are a mile long, and . . . well, I thought she seemed better lately."

"So, you leave her alone while you're at work?" All-Eyes was writing in his notebook.

"I have to. Mrs. Woods is really good about keeping an eye on her. She usually checks on her about mid morning. I have to work. We couldn't get by otherwise."

"Of course," All-Eyes murmured sympathetically.

"You work at the hospital, right?" I asked.

"Yes, I have the seven to three shift, but they've been letting me go in at six and get off at two. That way, Mom sleeps through the first couple of hours, so I don't worry so much."

"What time did you leave this morning?"

"About a quarter to six," Nancy said. "My mother was sound asleep. Mrs. Woods called me about an hour and a half ago and said Mom didn't answer the door when she went over. I came right home, and she was gone."

I knew missing persons cases weren't usually made official until at least a day after the person disappeared, but because of Mrs. Laplante's diagnosis of early Alzheimer's disease, we could activate a search immediately.

"Where have you looked?" All-Eyes asked.

Nancy sat down on the steps. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she listed off the places. "Well, I searched the house first thing, even the attic. Mrs. Woods helped me. The back yard, the neighborhood. I drove around the block. Then I called 911."

All-Eyes nodded. "We'll ask some of the other neighbors to help us look for her."

"Don't worry, Nancy," I said, handing her my handkerchief. "We'll find your mother."

Nancy was the youngest of Mrs. Laplante's seven children. She was in her mid forties, and had come back to live with her widowed mother after her divorce about ten years earlier. Everyone in the neighborhood liked Nancy. We liked her mother too,

although she was forgetful lately, and I was never sure if she recognized me anymore.

"When she did this before, where did you find her?" All-Eyes asked.

"Well, one night your father found her walking down the sidewalk in her pajamas. You remember that, Paul."

I nodded. "She's gone farther sometimes, though."

Nancy frowned. "Yes, she went as far as the 7-11 once. And last spring I found her down near the baseball diamond, in the other direction."

"All right, don't worry," I told her. "Stay near the phone and make yourself a cup of tea. I'll ask my mother to come over."

We stopped at my house and I filled Maman in.

"Poor Nancy! Of course I'll go over." She bustled around, packing a basket of cookies and banana bread.

"Any word on Lisa's car yet?" All-Eyes asked.

"No, she took my van to work," Maman said.

All-Eyes and I began cruising slowly around the neighborhood. We stopped several times to alert other people we knew to Mrs. Laplante's meandering. Then we parked the car and began knocking on doors. Finally, a couple of patrolmen came to help us, and All-Eyes and I got back in the car, widening our search and stopping frequently to speak to pedestrians.

"We should drop by the station for my truck," I said after thirty minutes. "We can cover twice the territory if we split up."

"You may be right," All-Eyes said grimly. "We need to find her before dark."

He looped around the block we were on and headed back toward the center of town.

"You don't think she'd head for the river, do you?" he asked.

"Don't even think it."

He grimaced. "Well, you know, if for a few minutes she was lucid enough to realize her condition, that would be pretty depressing, wouldn't it?"

I didn't answer. I was thinking that it was more than a mile from Mrs. Laplante's house to the river. It seemed funny that we hadn't been able to turn up anyone within a six-block radius who had seen her out walking that morning.

We were near the hardware store, and that reminded me of the mailbox again.

"Don't let me forget to pick up a new mailbox." I scanned the parking lot just in case Mrs. Laplante had wandered this far. "Wait! Stop!"

All-Eyes hit the brake.

"What?"

"Over there!"

"Mrs. Laplante?"

"No, Lisa's car."

Traffic was light, and he backed up, turning in at the parking lot entrance. "You sure it's Lisa's?"

"Pretty sure."

As we approached it, I took in the ding in the driver's door, where Lisa had parked too close to someone a month earlier, and the bumper sticker for her favorite radio station. "It's her car."

"There's someone in it."

I'd been so intent on identifying the car that I hadn't noticed. Sure enough, a short person was sitting in the driver's seat.

"Pull up behind it."

All-Eyes braked smoothly and I got out, approaching the car cautiously from the rear. The occupant didn't move. My pulse accelerated as I came even with the window and rapped on it lightly, bending down to look inside.

I was staring at Mrs. Laplante. She was wearing a fuzzy pink bathrobe. Her hair was up on small round curlers, and she stared straight ahead.

I stood up quickly and looked back at All-Eyes. He had his window down.

"Come here, quick."

He got out of the car and came to stand beside me.

"What do you know?" he said softly. "Hey, Paul, she doesn't look so good."

"My thoughts exactly. But the door's locked."

All-Eyes rushed to the other side and tried the passenger door.

"Locked. We gotta open it. I don't think she's breathing."

"Right. I'll do it. You call it in. Tell Andy to send an ambulance."

I ran for the toolbox in our car and worked frantically, but I knew already we were too late.

I stayed in the parking lot waiting for the medical examiner while All-Eyes went to break the news to Nancy. I'd called it in as an unattended death. Sergeant Clark canceled the ambulance and told us to handle it according to procedure, and said he would come touch base with us as soon as he could.

All-Eyes had taken the police car, but even so, I was drawing some stares. I decided to keep a low profile until the M.E. got there, hoping the *Sentinel* wouldn't get word of it for a while. I didn't want reporters in my face and taking pictures of poor Mrs. Laplante.

A man came out of the hardware store with a package and got in the car next to Lisa's, on the driver's side. I avoided making eye contact, but just stood near the car, trying to subtly shield Mrs. L. from his view. After he left, I stood in his parking space so no one would park there. When the M.E. arrived, I cordoned off some space around Lisa's car and the vacant space.

"This seat belt's awfully loose," was Dr. Sutter's first comment.

"How loose?" I asked.

He grunted. "Six extra inches around her waist, maybe."

My brain started clicking. Lisa had maybe ten pounds on Mrs. L., no more than that.

"You call the hearse yet?" the doctor asked.

"Yes, sir."

"We'll need a complete autopsy. You realize that."

"Yes, sir. We sent an officer to break the news to her daughter. He'll inform her."

"Time of death about eight A.M."

"That early?"

"I'd say so. Eight to nine."

"How could she sit here dead in the parking lot for five or six hours and nobody noticed?"

"Don't ask me. It's a funny world."

"Well sir, could you take a look at her feet please?"

Dr. Sutter turned and scowled at me. "Her feet?"

"Yes, sir. See, I know this lady. She lived across the street from me and down a couple of doors. She's barefoot, but if she walked out of her house and across the street and down to my yard to get in the car, she ought to have dirty feet, oughtn't she?"

His bushy white eyebrows drew together. "What do you mean, she walked over to your yard? What do you have to do with it? I thought you were the investigating officer."

"I am, sir, but this is my sister Lisa's car, and she reported it stolen around noontime."

Dr. Sutter stared at me for several seconds, and those eyebrows twitched a little.

"Hmpf." He stooped and grasped Mrs. Laplante's left ankle, pulling her foot toward him. "A little dirty. Clipped grass here."

"I parked Lisa's car on the edge of the lawn. My dad mowed the grass yesterday."

Dr. Sutter straightened. "How tall is your sister?"

"Five-two."

"Hmm."

I looked at him, then back at Mrs. Laplante. It hit me all of a

sudden. The driver's seat was pushed way back.

"Do you think she could reach the pedals with the seat like that?" I asked.

"Not comfortably."

"And would she think to move the seat? She had Alzheimer's. Not real bad yet, but still. I've never seen her drive before. I'll have to ask her daughter if she used to drive."

"I suggest you fingerprint this car."

"My thoughts exactly, sir."

By the time All-Eyes came back, my excitement was mounting.

"How'd Nancy take it?" I asked.

"Kind of hard, but she'll be okay. Your mom and Mrs. Woods are with her. I told her it was best if she didn't try to come over here."

A small crowd had gathered, and a reporter came shoving his way up to the yellow tape I'd run around from the bumper of Lisa's car to the handicapped parking sign a couple of spaces away.

"Who's in charge?" he yelled as the hearse entered the parking lot.

"Don't tell him anything," All-Eyes whispered. "We need to talk before we give the press anything."

"Agreed."

I pulled him aside and told him about the seat belt and Mrs. L.'s dirty feet. "I'm thinking we need to dust the steering wheel, the gear shift, everything."

He nodded. "Nancy said her mother hasn't driven in years. I asked her if she thought Mrs. Laplante could drive Lisa's car this far, and she was very skeptical. She figured if her mom drove it away, someone would have noticed."

I thought hard. "Mr. Reynolds. He's always out with Chumble or just sitting on his porch. Maybe he saw something."

"Right." All-Eyes scribbled in his pocket notebook. "We'd better question him right away. And we should ask the hardware store employees if they noticed the car here. They didn't open until nine."

I swallowed hard. "You know what this means, don't you?"

His big, round blue eyes flickered and he looked away, like he was trying to hide his exhilaration. "Another homicide."

"Yeah, and this one's all ours."

"Well, not quite. As soon as the sergeant knows, he'll have to call the state police."

I took a deep breath. "Well, then, we'd better get to work."

"You called Sergeant Clark already, right?"

"Yes, but that was when we thought it was her heart."

"We have to tell him," All-Eyes said.

I sighed. I knew it couldn't last. "All right, you call him. Tell him we're suspicious. Maybe he'll come check things out before he alerts S.P." Even the prospect of a few minutes with our own homicide case was exciting.

All-Eyes went to the unmarked car and got in and closed the door.

I went over to see if Dr. Sutter had anything else to tell me.

As soon as the sergeant heard, he called the state police. We had five minutes in the hardware store parking lot before Sergeant Clark arrived and another twenty before the state trooper got there. It was the same one who had responded to the homicide at the apartment house that morning, and he was looking tired and unhappy.

The sergeant convinced him to make the best use of the local boys, and All-Eyes and I were instructed to get Lisa's fingerprints for comparison and question the neighbors on Hoffstead Street.

"Lisa's working, right?" All-Eyes asked me in the car.

"Right."

"At the restaurant?"

"Right."

"I'll go take her prints."

I eyed him carefully. He seemed rational, but taking Lisa's prints was drudge work.

"You want an excuse to hold hands with my sister?"

He shrugged a little. "She's grown up."

"Yeah, right. She used to be a little brat. Now she's a big brat with a B.A. in philosophy."

"Philosophy, huh?"

"That's correct. I took criminal justice, and now I'm working in criminal justice. Seems obvious, doesn't it?"

He nodded.

"Not to Lisa. She majored in philosophy, so now she's cooking at the fanciest restaurant in town. Does that make sense?"

"Maybe she enjoys being embroiled in thought." He smiled. "I like a woman who thinks."

"Oh, she thinks, all right. Right now she thinks her car was taken for a joyride by the likes of Joey Bouchard. You got to break it to her that her car is the scene of a homicide."

"Maybe. They haven't reclassified it officially," he said.

"As soon as they lift the fingerprints they will."

"I'll tell her."

"Good. But I'm warning you—"

All-Eyes looked at me warily as he dropped me in front of the police station so I could get my pickup.

"Don't tell Fred Norman you like Lisa," I said. "He'd use you to wipe the floor of the duty room."

Mr. Reynolds lived alone, except for Chumble, on the other side of the Laplantes' from Mrs. Woods, closer to our house. He made it his business to know what was going on in our block.

"Mr. Reynolds, could I talk to you for a minute?" I asked when he came to the door.

He smiled at me through the screen door. "Well, Paul. You get that mailbox fixed yet?"

"Uh—well, no, actually, I've been too busy."

"Gotta be more careful when you back out of the driveway."

"Yes sir. Did you know Mrs. Laplante wandered off again today?"

"Yes, Mrs. Woods came by earlier to ask if I'd seen her."

"And you hadn't?"

"Afraid not." His regret was evident. "Chumble had an appointment with the veterinarian this morning. We were gone nearly two hours. Distemper and kennel cough shots."

"Well, I might as well tell you, we found her. It will be on the TV news tonight, I'm sure."

"Is she all right?"

"No, sir."

His dark eyes held my gaze for an instant, then he unlatched the screen. "Won't you step in, Detective?"

I was soon convinced Mr. Reynolds couldn't give any useful information; he just wanted to get it. I left him and began another round of the houses on our block. The afternoon was waning, and a few people who had been at work were coming home.

A little after five, All-Eyes caught up with me as I was leaving the LeClair sisters' place. That was a waste of time. They hadn't seen Lisa's car or Mrs. Laplante that morning.

"Hey, Paul, the sergeant says we'll work this case again tomorrow. We go in early again, and he'll put us right on it."

"Did they do the fingerprints yet?"

"Yeah, the state's mobile crime lab is over there in the parking lot. It's really cool. But they're about finished working there, and they're packing up for the night."

"Did they find anything in the parking lot?"

"No, they picked up some trash, but there wasn't anything, really. They're having Lisa's car towed to the police garage."

"She'll love that. When does she get it back?"

"I don't know. But guess what?" His blue eyes were huge with expectation.

"Mrs. Laplante's fingerprints were not on the steering wheel."

"Almost. There were some smeary ones," he said.

I nodded. "Like somebody held her hands up to the wheel after they got out?"

"Yeah. Somebody taller and fatter than Mrs. Laplante."

I smiled. It was bittersweet to have it be someone we knew, but I couldn't help feeling satisfaction. Dr. Sutter's instincts and mine had been right.

"So, anybody else's prints?"

"Besides Lisa's, you mean?"

"Didn't they find mine? I was the last one to drive it before . . ."

"Nope."

"So, the killer wiped the wheel?"

"Must have. They found a few of Lisa's, and Mrs. Laplante's, and a lot of gaps."

"Sounds about right. So somebody got her into Lisa's car and drove her over there, and then what?"

"Don't know." All-Eyes was more pensive than I'd seen him since the day of the detectives' test. "The thing is, Paul, was she alive when she got in the car? She wasn't restrained, but if someone was kidnapping her, you'd think her prints would be all over the inside of the passenger door, at least. And they didn't find her prints anywhere inside, except on the steering wheel, and then the technician said the angle wasn't right for her to be driving."

"Well, you've learned more than I have this afternoon. The only thing I've established is that Lisa's car didn't leave here until well after eight o'clock. The Carmichael kids left for the town swimming pool around seven thirty, and they saw it. Mrs. Harper said she saw it when she went out to get the paper. And Mr. Reynolds insisted it was still there when he left to take Chumble to the vet's, around quarter past eight."

"Well, I talked to the people at the hardware store, and the manager insists the car was not in the parking lot when he went in at eight forty-five. None of the employees noticed it when they went in, either."

I sighed. "It's only a couple of minutes from here to the hardware store. Maybe Lisa's car didn't leave home until later. But Dr. Sutter puts the time of death at between eight and nine."

All-Eyes nodded. "I don't see how anyone could kidnap an old lady on this street without being seen. Did they drive Lisa's car

over to Laplantes' and put her in there? Or did they force her to come to your house and get in?"

I stopped and looked hard at him. "We'd better go take a good look around the Laplantes' carport."

"We're off duty," All-Eyes said uneasily.

"Well, there's no harm in our visiting Nancy again. Neighborly condolence, you know."

Nancy's sisters Lila and Joan were there with her.

"I'm glad you boys came back," she said. "I found something a few minutes ago."

All-Eyes and I followed her eagerly into the kitchen.

"I was saying to Lila and Joan how strange it seems to have Mom gone, and that if she were here, it would be time for me to give her her pill."

"What kind of pill?" All-Eyes asked.

"Blood pressure. But when I looked at the prescription bottle, it was empty."

We looked at each other. "What does that mean?" I asked softly.

"She takes two pills a day, and I refill the prescription once a month. I just renewed it a week or so ago. There should have been at least forty pills in the bottle." Nancy crumpled into a chair at the kitchen table. "This is all my fault."

Lila put her arm around Nancy. "It's not your fault. None of us realized how bad Mom was, or we would have done something."

"I should have known she wasn't safe alone." Nancy's voice quavered. "I didn't want to believe she'd really do something like this."

"None of us believed it," Joan said. "Don't blame yourself."

"May I take the pill bottle, Nancy?" I asked. "We'll call the medical examiner and tell him."

She stared up at me. "Do you think this means it was accidental? Or suicide?"

I looked at All-Eyes.

"Well, the M.E. will check to see how much of this stuff was in her system," he said gently.

Nancy nodded. "Thank you, boys."

"Tell them about the blanket," said Joan.

"What blanket?" All-Eyes asked.

Nancy stood up. "Mom and I had a plaid wool throw over the back of the couch. She used it a lot when she took naps in there. I didn't think about it today, but Lila noticed it was gone first thing when she walked into the living room tonight."

"I gave it to Mom as a gift a couple of years ago," Lila said.

All-Eyes looked at me. "Was there a blanket in the car?"

"I didn't see one. Maybe we should ask all the neighbors if they found a blanket lying around."

We were just about to leave when the doorbell rang. Joan went to answer it, and a young couple came in. I recognized them. The Browns had moved onto our street in the spring. I'd questioned the wife that afternoon.

"We're sorry to bother you," Mrs. Brown said. "My husband just got home from work, and when I told him about Mrs. Laplante, Jack said he saw an elderly lady on the sidewalk this morning."

The man nodded slightly at me, and I thought he recognized me. "If I'd known she was sick, I'd have stopped," he said with a wince.

"That's all right," I told him. "What time was that?"

"Oh, a little after seven."

"That early?" All-Eyes asked, looking at me.

"Are you sure it was Mrs. Laplante?" I asked.

"Well, no."

"I can show you a picture," Nancy said. She went into the other room.

"Was she wearing a fuzzy pink bathrobe?" I asked.

"No, I think she had a dark coat, or a cape maybe."

"Could it have been a blanket?"

"Well . . . maybe."

Nancy came back with a framed photograph, and Jack took it and looked at it thoughtfully. "I think she's the one, but I can't be sure. The hair's the same color. She looked older."

"This picture's fifteen years old," Nancy said.

"Where exactly did you see her?" I asked.

"She was near the house with the malamute."

We asked Jack a few more questions, then said good night to the Browns and the ladies and went back to my house. My dad was out at the end of the driveway, putting up a new mailbox.

"Hey, Dad, I was going to do that."

He eyed me calmly as he fitted the box to the new post. "Did you bring home a new mailbox too?"

"Well, no, I forgot. I meant to. Sorry."

He shrugged. "Big day for you boys today."

All-Eyes winked at me, but he didn't say anything. I was glad.

"You call the M.E.'s office," All-Eyes said. "We gotta be at the police garage when they start going over the car tomorrow."

Lisa came home late. I was in bed, but she came and pounded on my door anyway.

"I want my car."

"Tough."

She opened the door and walked in. "Is that all you can say? This is your fault, and you know it." She snapped on the lamp, and I pulled the sheet up over my eyes.

"My fault?"

"Yes. You left my keys in my car, and that sweet old lady was kidnapped and murdered in it!"

"Oh, like she'd still be alive if I'd brought the keys back inside?"

Lisa frowned. "Well, I don't know about that, but I do know I'd have my car and my snorkel gear."

"Your snorkel gear?"

"Yes. Tina wants me to take her snorkeling Saturday, and my gear's in the trunk of my car."

"Tina the waitress?"

"Yes. From the restaurant. I thought I'd ask All-Eyes if his folks would mind if I took her out to their cottage."

I was wide awake now, and I pushed the sheet back and sat up. "We're going to work on the case again tomorrow. If they won't release your car, I'll ask if I can at least bring your snorkeling stuff home."

She smiled. "So, would you and All-Eyes like to tag along Saturday?"

I hesitated. "Is this, like, a date?"

Lisa shrugged. "Do you want it be? Tina thinks you're passable."

"Ha." I eyed her cautiously. "Is she the blonde?"

She laughed. "We'll take a picnic. Ask All-Eyes in the morning, and have him call me."

"What do you think of Fred Norman?" I asked.

"He's a big teddy bear. A little slow on the uptake."

"And All-Eyes is . . . ?"

Her eyes crinkled a little, and she paused just a fraction of a second. "My brother's best friend, what else?"

"Oh well, it would probably be pretty boring for you if we went along."

She grabbed my extra pillow. "Listen, Paul, if you don't want to go, fine. I'll tell Tina." She threw the pillow at me.

The crime lab guys were already at work when we got to the police garage the next morning. Sergeant Clark went with us, and the first thing we did was tell the state guys about the missing medication and the blanket.

"We haven't opened the trunk yet," said Wilson, the trooper in charge of the investigation.

"You think the blanket's in there?" All-Eyes asked.

"You never know. We got one surprise already this morning."

"What was that?" the sergeant asked.

"We took one good thumbprint off the outside door handle on the rear passenger door."

"Not my sister's?" I asked.

"Nope. The victim's."

All-Eyes and I stared at each other.

I cleared my throat. "You found Mrs. L.'s prints on the outside of the back door?"

"That's right. The lab techs are going over the back seat now."

We stood watching, reluctant to leave. Sergeant Clark had already told All-Eyes and me we'd be trying to chase down some of the hardware store's customers. All of us still thought someone should have noticed Mrs. Laplante in the parking lot.

One of the technicians came over to Wilson with an evidence bag. "Hairs caught on the corner of the back seat."

Wilson took the bag and looked closely at the hairs. "Could be the victim's."

"We'll make a comparison as soon as we're done with the car."

"Let's open the trunk," Wilson said.

"Sure, I guess we're about done inside. The car's pretty clean."

I raised my eyebrows a little, and All-Eyes smiled. For once, my sister the neatnik was an asset.

Wilson went to the back of the car and put the key into the lock. We all crowded in, anxious to see if the missing plaid blanket was in the trunk. The latch clicked, and he carefully raised the lid.

No blanket, but between the spare tire and Lisa's swim mask and fins were three rural mailboxes.

"You got it?" Sergeant Clark asked anxiously.

I nodded. All-Eyes and I were copying the numbers from the mailboxes into our notebooks. One had GRENIER in sticky letters, and the number 3157. The other two just had numbers, 3160 and 3205.

"Get over to the post office," Clark said. "It shouldn't take you long to find out who these belong to. Talk to the owners and find out how long they've been missing their mailboxes. I'll put a couple of patrolmen on looking for hardware customers and asking the neighbors about the blanket."

An hour later we were headed out toward River Road. I was driving the unmarked car.

"So, what do you think?" I asked. "Homicide, suicide, or accident?"

"I don't know. If she really took all those pills . . ."

"Yeah, I guess only the M.E. can tell us that. But even so . . ."

"Right," said All-Eyes. "Either she didn't know what she was doing, or she did."

"The pills may have nothing to do with it."

"Jack Brown said she was alone when he saw her, and she wasn't too far from Lisa's car."

I nodded, watching the side of the road carefully. "But we know there was someone else involved."

"Right. Mrs. Laplante didn't drive to the hardware store," All-Eyes said. "Turn here."

"What number is that?" I slowed so he could read the next mailbox.

"3142."

We crept on.

"There."

The mailbox post stood bare. I turned into the driveway.

"It happened yesterday," Mrs. Grenier told us. "I went shopping, and when I came back the mailbox was gone."

"Did you call the police?"

"No. Should I? I called the post office."

It was pretty much the same story at the other two houses. All three mailboxes came from a quiet residential area that didn't see much traffic during the day. All were sheltered from the owners' view by trees or fences.

"Oh, there was one strange thing," said Mr. Smiley, at the last of the three houses. "When my wife went out to get the mail, the mailbox was gone, but there was a wool blanket lying on the ground."

"Do you still have it?" I asked, trying not to look too eager.

"Do you think Mr. Reynolds has anything to do with this case?" All-Eyes asked on the way back. "Maybe we should check to see if Chumble really did have an appointment with the vet."

I snorted. "Why would Mr. Reynolds want to kill Mrs. Laplante?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe he was interested in Nancy, but she wouldn't marry him because she had to take care of her mother all the time."

"So he figured if he bumped her mother off, Nancy would fly into his arms? Get real."

All-Eyes shrugged. "Well, maybe he wanted her property, and she wouldn't sell it to him."

"She didn't own the house."

"What?" He stared at me.

"Yesterday I asked Nancy who would benefit from her mother's death."

"And?"

"Nobody. Mrs. L.'s been renting that house for ages. Her Social Security isn't much. Nancy's been supporting her all this time."

He sighed. "I guess the other kids wouldn't have a reason to murder her, either. Unless they didn't want to have to help pay for her upkeep or something."

"I think it's more likely someone broke in to steal her medication and she surprised him."

All-Eyes thought about that. "So then she grabbed the blanket and ran out of the house and down the street."

"Maybe the thief chased her and made her get in the car." Even when I said it, I knew it didn't mesh with what Jack Brown had seen.

We found Wilson in the mobile crime lab van and told him the mailboxes had all disappeared roughly the same time Mrs. Laplante died, and that we'd found her blanket.

"Well, we hit pay dirt with those mailboxes," Wilson said. "We lifted some terrific prints."

"Just don't tell me they're my sister's," I said. "I don't think I can deal with having a mailbox thief in the family."

Wilson cracked a smile for the first time since I'd met him. "No, one set belongs to a young man from your neighborhood. The second set isn't in the system. Yet."

"A young man . . ." I looked at All-Eyes.

"He's been in trouble before," Wilson said. "Criminal mischief. Shooting BB's at cars and stealing pumpkins last fall."

"Joey Bouchard," All-Eyes and I said at the same time.

"We know him," I said. "You want us to go pick him up?"

"Please do. I'm thinking he and a friend used your sister's car for yesterday's mailbox spree."

Joey wasn't home, but his sister told us he was at his friend Steven's house, and that's where we found him, or more precisely, behind Steven's house. Steven's parents were at work, and the boys were sprawled in lounge chairs enjoying a cigarette.

As I stepped through the gate in the fence to the back yard, I put on a regretful smile. "Last time I checked, you were still too young to smoke, Joey."

All-Eyes was right behind me as the boys dropped their cigarettes and tried to grind them out without collapsing the lawn chairs on themselves. "Minors possessing tobacco products." He shook his head. "Hundred dollar fine now, Paul?"

Joey scrambled to stand up.

"Sit," I growled. "We've got bigger things to talk about."

"I didn't do nothing."

"Now, that I believe."

All-Eyes grinned at me. "A gentleman and a scholar."

I sat down on the bench of the family's picnic table and stared at Joey for a moment, then at Steven. Steven swallowed hard and looked away.

"So, Steve, what do you want to hang around with this character for?" I asked.

"Lay off," said Joey.

All-Eyes stepped toward him menacingly. "Don't you get mouthy with the detective."

Joey sneered, but he kept quiet.

I smiled. "Just tell me about the mailboxes, Steven."

The kid's eyes widened, and he whipped around to stare at Joey.

"You got nothing," Joey said in my direction, looking daggers at Steven.

"That right? I wouldn't call fingerprints all over the mailboxes in the trunk of my sister's car *nothing*."

Joey gulped, and Steven's eyes held stark terror.

"We forgot the—"

"Shut up," said Joey.

I pulled out my notebook and pretended to make a list. "Let's see. That's criminal mischief, theft, driving without a license—"

"Don't forget the tobacco." All-Eyes was enjoying this.

"Right. Tobacco possession . . . and . . . homicide." I raised my gaze to meet Joey's, and I heard Steven gasp.

"You boys don't strike me as murderers," I said.

"We're not!" Steven shrieked.

"Shut up!" Joey glared at him, then looked up at All-Eyes. "Are you arresting us?"

"Please, I don't want to be arrested," Steven said shakily.

"Right now we're just talking," All-Eyes said.

"Tell me about Mrs. Laplante." I focused on Steven.

"We didn't know she was in there."

Joey exhaled sharply and turned his back on his friend, staring at the fence.

"She was in the car when you got in it?" I asked slowly.

Steven's face was pale. I was afraid he was going to be sick. "In the back seat. I thought it was just an old blanket, but after we got the third mailbox, Joey said the trunk was getting full, and we ought to put the next one in the back seat."

I looked at Joey. He was obviously going through a mental struggle. "If anyone could be helped by calling 911, I would do that," he said. "But when someone is obviously beyond help . . . well . . ."

"We just didn't want anyone to think we did something to her," Steven blurted. "Joey thought if we made it look like she drove over to the hardware store, no one would know we were anywhere near her." He shrugged. "Nobody was around when we got there. We forgot about the mailboxes until after we got home, but we were afraid to go back and get them. I mean, somebody would notice if we took the—"

"Would you shut up?" Joey asked bleakly. "Aren't we allowed to have a lawyer or something?"

"And who is your attorney?" All-Eyes said graciously. "Do you have him on a retainer?"

Joey looked down at his sneakers. "Last time, the judge found me one."

"I want my dad," Steven said.

"Is your father at work?" I asked.

He nodded.

I stood up. "All right, boys, you're coming to the police station with us. We'll call your parents from there, and you can tell us all about Mrs. Laplante and Lisa's car and the mailboxes. If you want a lawyer, Joey, we'll get you one. Let's go."

When Lisa came home from work Friday night, I was sitting in front of the TV half asleep, wondering why I hadn't gone to bed yet.

"Am I hallucinating, or is that my car in the driveway?"

I opened one eye wider. "Quiet down, you'll wake up Mom and Dad. It's your car."

"Well! After three whole days!" She plopped down beside me on the sofa. "Did you guys clean it?"

"What do you mean, did we clean it? That's stupid."

Lisa pulled back with an injured air. "You don't expect me to drive it after a dead woman was in it for hours and hours, do you?"

"Have it detailed." I lifted my feet from the coffee table, sat up, and stretched.

"Oh no. You're not getting out of it that easy."

"What?"

"You are going to have it detailed."

"Me?"

"You."

"I don't have any problem with Mrs. Laplante dying in your car."

"Well, I do, and it's your fault."

"Whoa there! You left it unlocked. She wasn't trying to drive off in it. She just wasn't feeling well after all those pills she'd swallowed, and she was looking for a place to sleep it off."

Lisa scowled at me. "Don't try to weasel out of this, Paul. Those boys were looking for wheels for their next round of terrorizing, and you practically handed them the keys."

I stood up. "Hey, it *may* be my fault Joey and Steven were able to steal your car so easily, but it is *not* my fault Mrs. Laplante OD'd on her meds and chose it as her final resting place. The M.E. said it was amazing she could walk half a block after she took those pills."

Lisa crossed her arms and went into the pouty mode.

"So, what are you putting in the lunch basket tomorrow?" I asked.

Her eyes flickered. "I thought you didn't want to go."

"Did you get Tina another date?"

"No."

"Come on, I know All-Eyes called you today. He said we're on for swimming and a gourmet lunch."

Lisa frowned so hard, I was pretty sure she was trying to hold back a smile. "I'm only letting you come because Tina's never been snorkeling before, and you're a certified lifeguard."

"Oh. Okay. And why are you letting All-Eyes come?"

She stood up and walked over close to me. "Tell me something. If you two are such hotshot detectives, how come you weren't able to find our mailbox? Allen told me Joey and Steven absolutely deny stealing ours, even though they confessed to taking a couple of dozen others. I think you'd better be nice to me, or there's a lot I could tell Mom and Dad."

"What is this, blackmail? Be nice to you!"

Her eyes narrowed. "I want that car cleaned."

"Tell you what, Tina and I will ride in the back seat. You won't have to worry about it."

"We're taking Allen's car tomorrow."

"Allen?" I said. "Who's this Allen?"

That's when she hit me. 🦋

THE GUN

TERRY BLACK

Nobody's looking, Craig thought, sidling up to the candy counter with his pulse pounding in his ears. He stood on tiptoe, snatched the Hershey bar between fingers clammy with perspiration, and slipped it into his pocket, trying to look unsuspecting. No one seemed to notice or care. It wasn't until Craig was leaving the drug store, congratulating himself on a theft well done, that he saw the man with the gun in his corduroys.

He was leaving the store too. Strolling out onto the concourse of North Pines Mall in cowhide boots and a blue denim jacket, his hair tied back in a sausage-thick ponytail. He towered over Craig like a great, unshaven Goliath, smelling of splashed-on cologne. Craig wouldn't have seen the gun at all except the guy bent down to fix his boot and his shirttail rode up over his waistband, where the gun had been tucked away for safekeeping.

He knows what I did, Craig realized, and he's following me.

Craig edged away, trying to lose himself in the thinning crowd. He wondered where the guy was but was scared to look back and see. He wondered what was taking so long, why the guy didn't just march up and arrest him. And then Craig remembered a story his dad had told him, about running a red light on Howard Street.

A cop saw him. They had him dead to rights. But the cop didn't pull him over, not right away, he just got on Dad's tail and followed him for about ten miles, playing with him, seeing what he'd do. When he finally got his ticket, it was almost a relief.

Now the man with the gun was following Craig. Just a few steps behind, in no particular hurry. But Craig could feel him, like a cold shadow, dogging his tracks. The Hershey bar in his pocket seemed to weigh about nine pounds.

"Hey, Craig!" said a voice, making him flinch. He looked up and saw his mom over by the newsstand, browsing the tabloids. She liked to do that, Mom did, she was always leafing through the pages reading all about movie stars and then putting the magazine

back without paying for it. ("It's not dishonest," she said, "because they shouldn't be publishing trash like that in the first place.")

Now she put her tabloid down—something about a rock star doing something to another rock star—and came toward Craig. "Did you get my aspirin, honey?"

"Uh, yeah." Craig fished the little bag out of his pocket and gave it to her. He didn't say anything about stealing a Hershey bar on his way out, or being followed out of the drug store by an armed security guard. Craig half-expected the guy to walk up any minute and say, "Your son's in a great deal of trouble, ma'am," his hand landing heavily on Craig's shoulder. But he didn't. Instead he was just standing there, not far away, looking at magazines without seeming to care much what was in them.

Playing with me, Craig thought.

"It's almost lunchtime," Mom said, glancing at her watch. She had auburn hair and eyes that crinkled at the corners. Her name was Sylvia but everyone called her "Babs," for reasons Craig could never understand. "Would you like a cheeseburger?"

"I guess so."

She frowned. "Is your tooth still bothering you, honey?"

"Yeah, kind of." Craig's left bottom canine was coming loose, one of his last baby teeth still in place. He was always jabbing it with his tongue, or working it with his finger, trying to pry it loose, but the stubborn tooth wouldn't budge. At least it gave Craig an excuse for his faltering appetite.

"Come on, honey, you can have some curly fries." Mom took his hand and led him into Wendy's, across from the escalator. It smelled of salt and grease. They got in line behind a woman with stringy hair and a purse as big as a laundry bag. It took forever to get served. When they got to the front of the line, Mom ordered curly fries for Craig and a salad for herself. The stringy-haired woman, Craig noticed, got a chicken sandwich and coffee.

The man with the gun was nowhere to be seen.

"Let me show you what I found," Mom said, when they finally sat down. "They had a clearance sale." She started pulling clothing items out of her bag, showing them off with obvious pride, but Craig paid no attention. He didn't care about clothes, not even when things were fine, and especially not now, when he was worried about getting thrown in jail for shoplifting. I should've just paid for it, he thought, but it was too late now.

Craig looked at the blouse his mom was holding up, something blue with little ducks on it. He picked at his curly fries. He shoved his tooth with his thumb but it was stuck tight, locked in place.

His mom pulled out slacks and blouses for about nine more hours, then noticed he wasn't eating.

"You've hardly touched your lunch, Craig," she said, though she hadn't eaten much of hers either. "Don't you want anything? Maybe some dessert?"

Craig thought of the candy bar in his pocket. "No thanks, Mom."

"We'd better get your shoes, then." That was the last item on her list, and the main reason they'd come to North Pines Mall—to get Craig a pair of shoes for the upcoming school year, now just three weeks away. Craig hated buying shoes, but at the moment he could think of things a whole lot worse.

"Yeah, okay," he said.

They stood up to leave, Mom discarding her lunch trash and tut-tutting when Craig forgot his. On the way out of Wendy's, he noticed the stringy-haired woman sipping her coffee at a table in the corner. The chicken sandwich was for her boyfriend. He wore cowhide boots and a blue denim jacket, his hair tied back in a ponytail.

Craig caught his breath. It was the guy from the drug store, the security officer, still following him. The guy was sitting on the hard plastic seat, looking uncomfortable, probably because the gun under his waistband was pressing painfully into his back.

He and the stringy-haired woman were arguing about something. Craig caught the words "I'll handle it" and "wait and see." The guy looked at Craig with an unreadable expression, taking another bite of his chicken sandwich.

Craig ducked behind his mom, pretending not to notice.

The shoe department at Sears was crowded with other kids and moms, trying on an endless parade of flashy and ill-fitting shoes. Craig wanted a simple pair of tennis shoes, but Mom wanted to try all the fancy ones, with lights and reflectors and air pockets in the heel. The worst part was that he had to try on every pair his mother liked, which meant parading up and down the aisle when all he wanted was to keep his head down.

Craig was trying on a pair of high tops that pinched his toes when he had an idea. Sooner or later the ponytailed man would try to arrest him; the Hershey bar in his pocket was evidence of his crime. All he had to do was drop it in the garbage, and his theft would be impossible to prove.

Craig wandered over to a trash can on a post, with a sign reading KEEP OUR MALL SPOTLESS! He groped into his pocket for the Hershey bar, then realized it wouldn't be so easy to get rid of. The

chocolate had melted into a sticky mess, oozing right through the foil into the lining of his pocket.

Awkwardly, Craig tossed the bar away and tried to clean his pants with a napkin fished out of the trash. But he'd seen enough crime shows to know they had experts who could analyze foreign substances with scientific tests, and it wouldn't be hard to prove where Craig had kept his stolen chocolate.

He was still in trouble, and his feet hurt from the shoes.

Craig went back to where his mom sat waiting. "Those look good on you," she said, though to Craig they seemed no better than the last pair. "How do they feel?"

Craig was tempted to say "They're fine" even though it hurt to wear them. "Let's get out of here" was what he wanted to say, but he couldn't think of any way to explain why. Instead he took them off and tried the next pair, and the next, until they found some Nikes that were reasonably comfortable—not that he'd be needing them, after he went off to wherever they sent underage criminals.

Mom put Craig's old shoes in the shoebox so he could wear the new ones out of the store. "Sure you don't want another pair?" she asked, and Craig almost screamed with frustration. But he managed to shake his head, eyes downcast, and Mom reached for her credit card. She made the purchase as Craig loitered fitfully by the register, scanning the store for signs of trouble. The man with the gun wasn't around.

Maybe he'd been called away on a more important assignment. Maybe he'd forgotten all about Craig. Maybe he wasn't even a security guard at all, just some guy wandering around with a gun under his pants—but why, Craig kept wondering, would anybody do that?

They were heading for the exit. They were leaving the store. Whoever the ponytailed man was, it wasn't Craig's problem anymore. He could go home with his fancy new shoes and forget this had ever happened. He wished the Hershey bar hadn't melted so he could eat it when they got home.

"Hold up, I forgot something," his mom said.

Craig looked exasperated. "Mom, could we just go?"

"Pretty soon, honey." She fingered her wedding band, twin diamonds in an elegant gold setting. "I just wanted to stop by the jeweler's, one of these stones is coming loose. Won't take a minute, I promise."

"But Mom—"

"I promise, honey." And she hustled him back to the jewelry shop, which was two doors down from the newsstand and right

next to the drug store where he'd stolen the Hershey bar in the first place. Craig wanted to hide his face; he felt like somebody from *America's Most Wanted* hanging around the crime scene when that ponytailed security guard could be anywhere, ready to grab him.

Two couples were already in the jewelry shop, a man in a wool coat with his ash-blond wife and two teenagers in matching knit sweaters. A saleswoman in a tan skirt was showing the ash blond an assortment of gold-plated earrings. She kept choosing one but then changing her mind and putting it back. In a rear alcove, a bald man wearing a visor cap squinted at something through an eyepiece.

Mom started forward but one of the teenagers glared at her, as if to say, wait your turn.

"They're pretty busy," Craig said, though he knew from experience that once committed to something Mom seldom changed her mind. Sure enough, she didn't move. Craig sucked at his tooth and looked around at the eye-popping displays of rings, earrings, bracelets, and watches, artfully arranged in trays against black velvet. Must be worth a fortune, he thought. Of course, it was all behind glass, you couldn't just reach in and swipe what you wanted, it wasn't like that candy counter.

If you wanted *this* stuff, you'd have to rob the place.

Craig swallowed. He'd seen a movie on TV where some crooks were planning a heist—they said that, "planning a heist"—and the first step was always to look around, to gather information and plan it all in advance. You'd hang around, maybe go to the newsstand next door, pretending to read a magazine or something, looking the place over. You'd bring a gun, but you wouldn't let anyone see it until you were good and ready.

Unless you got a little careless, and showed it to some kid.

"Mom," Craig said, tugging his mother's coat sleeve. She shrugged him off. "Mom," he said urgently, "can we just go?"

"I told you, honey, it won't take a minute."

"We need to go *now*."

"You can wait another minute."

"No, I can't."

"Listen, Craig—" She looked at him with a pained expression, and he knew this was going to be the Acting Grownup speech, where Mom went on and on, blah blah, about adult responsibility and not acting up out in public, only none of that seemed to matter now because of the terrible suspicion Craig had about what was about to happen next—

"NOBODY MOVE!" cried an angry voice.

It was the guy with the ponytail. His gun was no longer a secret. He was waving it around, shoving it into the face of the saleswoman in the tan skirt, yelling "Give me everything NOW!" while everyone ducked and flinched and tried to act cooperative. The guy had pulled a nylon stocking over his head, Craig saw, but it had a big hole on one side and didn't really hide his face much.

"Sir, I'll give you whatever you want," the saleswoman said, opening a display case, trying to sound brave. "Just please don't do anything foolish."

"Shut up!" the guy snapped, waving his gun at her. "Put everything right in here." He threw a pillowcase at her. She nodded and started filling it with jewelry. "Faster!" he said.

Craig was looking up at the saleswoman and could see things the guy couldn't, like when she pressed a button on the side of the display case as she was reaching for a pearl necklace. Craig thought it must be an alarm, but he couldn't hear anything and neither could anyone else.

The man in the wool coat was edging toward the exit. The guy saw him. "I said *nobody move!*" he said, bringing his gun around. The wool-coated man blanched and scrambled away from the door.

The saleswoman finished emptying out the display case. "That one too," the guy said, pointing. "And speed it up."

She nodded, moving to the next case.

Craig watched people passing by in the mall, going on about their business. No one seemed to pay them any attention. You'd think someone would have heard the commotion, but as far as Craig could see it was business as usual out there. Craig's mom gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "It's okay, honey," she said.

"Shut up!" said the guy.

The saleswoman finished emptying the second case. The guy waved her to a third case, the last one. She opened it up and started emptying its contents.

"It's probably a false alarm," said a voice from the concourse.

Craig looked up to see two uniformed officers approaching the jewelry shop. They wore guns in holsters. The one who was speaking was older and a bit overweight.

"It's always a false alarm," he was saying. "I've been doing this nine years, trust me, no one's going to come in here and try to—"

The guy shot him. He jerked and tumbled backward into the concourse. The second officer managed to draw his weapon but

only got off one round, a wild one, before the guy hit him twice in the chest. The officer sat down heavily, his head lolling backward. His eyes did not close. The gun fell from his hand.

The ash-blond woman screamed and ran. Everyone panicked, the wool-coated man and the knit-sweater teenagers and the saleswoman and jeweler and Craig's mom. They fled the store in a stampede. Craig ran after them but he lost his grip on his mother's hand and tripped on the laces of his brand-new shoes. He fell to the ground under the third display case.

"Are you *insane*?" The stringy-haired woman had appeared in the doorway. She was furious. "You just shot two cops," she said, advancing on her boyfriend. "What the hell were you thinking?"

"They're not real cops," the guy said. "I think they work for the mall."

"You weren't going to do this unless it was safe. You promised me. And your nylon's got a hole in it, they can tell who you are."

"I don't care." The guy picked up his pillowcase stuffed with stolen jewelry. "Here, give me your purse."

"So I can go to jail too? No thanks."

"I mean it, Sally—"

"Go to hell." She turned her back and stormed away.

For a moment the guy just stood there, dumbfounded. He looked at the pillowcase, at his departing girlfriend, and at the pillowcase again. His mouth opened but no words came out.

Then he got mad, really mad. He went over to the officer sitting on the floor and kicked him viciously in the ribcage. The officer showed no reaction. The guy kicked him again and again. He started swearing, working up a sweat. He reared back for another kick and lost his balance and went over backward, with the gun in one hand and the pillowcase in the other.

His head struck the corner of the display case. He crashed to the ground, insensible. His gun spun away across the tile floor and came to rest right in front of Craig.

There was an eerie silence, as if the moment was frozen in amber, suspended in time.

Craig touched the gun. It was hot. It smelled like fireworks. He wondered how it would feel in his hand.

He didn't want to pick it up but he felt a strange compulsion, seeing it there on the floor in front of him, just inches away. That same compulsion he always felt to do just what he shouldn't do, the opposite of wisdom, that wrong impulse that was so irresistible.

Craig picked up the gun. It was heavy, hard to lift. He had to use both hands because his fingers wouldn't go all the way around it.

From above him came a cry of rage.

It was the guy with the ponytail, coming at him. Mad beyond reason. Something went SNICK! and flashed in his hand.

Craig raised the gun, groping for the trigger. He couldn't seem to find it. He clawed at the hard metal and then the gun exploded and flew backward and hit him in the face. He fell on his back and cracked his head on the tile. He saw rainbow colors, pin-wheeling in the darkness.

He opened his eyes.

He was lying on the floor, under the third display case. He was looking at something on the ground, small and white and dappled with blood. His mouth hurt. He reached out and plucked his lost baby tooth up off the floor.

He sat up. Someone was yelling something. He looked over and saw the saleswoman pointing at him, saying, "It was the kid, I swear, I saw it, the kid shot him." At her feet was the ponytailed man, lying on the ground in a crumpled heap.

"My God, honey, are you all right?"

Craig's mom came up and grabbed him in a crushing bearhug. "I'm so sorry, honey, I thought you were right behind me, I never should have left you here." She looked at him with concern.

"Honey, are you all right?"

Craig shook his head, and started to cry.

"I stole a chocolate bar," he said. "I'm sorry." 🐾

Solution to the July/August "UNSOLVED"

Gus Coles informed on Hank Edson, the banker.

HUSBAND	WIFE	LAST NAME	JOB	PET	PTA	MUS	GOLF	DOOR
Ike	Marie	Anson	doctor	collie	+	o	+	white
Jack	Rosie	Burns	artist	elkhound	o	+	o	orange
Gus	Quilla	Coles	clerk	bulldog	+	o	+	yellow
Lem	Olga	Dawes	farmer	Airedale	+	o	o	red
Hank	Nola	Edson	baker	foxhound	o	+	+	green
Karl	Peggy	Faxon	editor	dachshund	o	+	o	brown

MYSTERY CLASSIC

WILL PAYNE

THE DETECTIVES

Sitting at his small, rough, unpainted table in the lower end of the little public garden, the young man surveyed the scene with slow, indifferent eyes.

Twoscore such tables were disposed in a scanty grove of young trees, and twenty persons sat about gossiping and sipping the beer fetched by two mussed waiters. A harp, a flute, and a fiddle tinkled popular airs intermittently in a corner. Much trampling had worn the coarse grass so thin that the sandy soil appeared to be coming up through it. The leaves stirred very softly in the hot, still sunshine. In the intervals of the tinkling it was so quiet that when one of the two policemen, off duty, in the upper end of the garden, gave a big, vigorous laugh, everybody looked around.

Coming in, the young man had noticed the policemen. He looked at them now with an apathy which was like the dying down of his last sense of contact with the world. Even policemen were only passive and idle figments in a scheme of things all idle and indescribably remote. All of those beings at their little tables—it seemed to him that he had only to wink his eyes and they would vanish; the broad, hot, still sunshine would pour over a garden empty of all but him. He thought that he did not care, particularly. Caring was too active a state of mind. He felt the perception of a sorrow so big and immutable that any merely human activity was quite grotesque. For some moments, indeed, he occupied himself with staring at the untouched mug of beer before him, watching the swift dissolution of the froth bubbles. He fancied they were lives foolishly winking out in dozens, while he watched, idly changeless. He did not taste the drink. Once there had been too much of that—so recently that the malty smell now touched his nerves with a subtle repugnance, and he pushed the mug aside. It was a thing that he had been through like all the rest. Perhaps it was well enough to stand in the very bottom of the

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trough and calmly take account of one's self there; to be at the farther side of everything, sad, indifferent, waiting for nothing.

But he was to have some company, after all.

A chubby man carrying a baby, and accompanied by a little girl, was coming up to the next table. They too were very poor, and the young man tacitly admitted them to a place beside his solitude.

The chubby father let the baby slide into one of the heavy wooden chairs, and the little girl instantly busied herself, mother-wise, smoothing out the child's rumpled frock of clean faded calico, placing his fat legs to give a better balance in the big seat, straightening the cheap wide straw hat, ludicrously too old, that was fastened with a string under his double chin. The girl herself looked not more than ten—a slim little thing, with a round, homely, freckled face, a clean faded calico frock, and a straw hat just like the baby's. The chubby father had a rosy, good-humored face, and bright dark eyes almost as infantile as the child's.

When the waiter came up, there was a colloquy in a foreign tongue between the father and daughter, in which he seemed to be urging her on. Finally, very shyly, looking into her lap, the maid said in so low a tone that the waiter stooped to hear, "One glass of lemonade."

The waiter hurried away. The little girl bent her head still lower and folded her hands, as though she felt conspicuous before the world; but the young man could see her smiling in a childish, self-conscious way to herself, and he understood the proportions, the rareness, of this tremendous treat.

Presently the waiter returned, bearing on his battered tray a tall glass of lemonade. The disks of yellow lemon lay amid the cracked ice. There was a red cherry at the bottom. Two long golden straws protruded from the glass. The little girl looked at it with a kind of solemnity, not offering to touch it at first. The father, his hand in his pocket, but forgetful of the waiter for a moment, twinkled and beamed at her and at the whole lower end of the garden. His shining face turned to the solitary young man as though asking him to appreciate this precious joke.

The maid drew the glass slowly to the edge of the table, while even the smiling, indulgent, mussed waiter forgot his trade. She put her mouth to the straws and took a long drink. She ceased, and looked at her father, drawing the corner of her lip between her teeth, laughing a little, and slowly shaking her head in a confusion of gratitude, self-consciousness, and satisfaction that was too much for words.

The father gave a chuckling, gratulatory laugh; drew a nickel from his pocket and laid it on the table.

"It's fifteen cents," said the mussed waiter.

The little girl gave a startled glance, and pushed the glass quickly from her in a frightened way. "I drank only a little," she murmured involuntarily.

The chubby father stared at the waiter, and slowly comprehended. His bright eyes fell. One could see his shame, as though his nakedness had suddenly been exposed. He searched his pocket, and finally drew out a dime, which he laid on the table. The mussed waiter swept it into his hand, under the startled, helpless glance of the little girl.

The father, still very grave, murmured a word consolingly. But the maid sat back from the table, far withdrawn from the ruinous glass. Again she looked into her lap. Her meek freckled face showed the tragedy of the lost dime.

The young man stared over at them. He was nervously fingering the few coins in his pocket; but he had a curiously abeyant sense, as though he were looking, waiting for the climax.

The baby began clamoring. The maid leaned over, drew his fat little body up against her and kissed him loudly. She looked hardly the bigger of the two.

Suddenly, as though that loud kiss were the cue, the young man's heart began beating fast. Far within him he felt the deep human sap moving aright with precious pains and longing. A mistiness came into his eyes. He wished to say: "Dear people, come over to me. We have been wounded with the same arrow—you with your dime, and I—The same dog has bitten us both."

The chubby baby slid, turtle-like, from his chair, and began making some excursions over the trying ground. The young man pulled his hat over his brows, so that he could just see the stumbling little feet, the uncertain little legs, the bobbing skirt of the poor clean calico frock. By, and by the adventurer came that way; stooped in a funny, awkward posture, and peered up at the face that was shadowed by the hat brim. In a moment the young man got out his watch. Holding it under the edge of the table, where only the child would see, he made the case fly open and snapped it shut. The baby came over. The bait was delivered into his eager, brown little hands. The young man, very gently and circumspectly, as one lands a big fish, lifted him to his knee, softly, slyly hugging him. He surreptitiously felt the sturdy little legs. His fingers closed over the fat little hands, under pretense of showing how to operate the watch spring.

The young man was careful not to look over at the other table.

They might not understand. They might take the child away. But when the baby tugged hard at the watch chain the little girl spoke reprovingly, and came over to keep him to his good behavior. Then the young man perceived that she too had her curiosity respecting the watch. He opened the case for her, made the hands move forward and back, showed how the watch unsnapped from the chain. She was leaning against his knee, quite absorbed. Presently the father came over, nodding in brisk amiability, his chubby, ruddy face shining with good-fellowship. When the young man pushed out a chair he sat down. In a moment the conversation was going like this:—

"Yes, the watch is ten years old—as old as you. I have had it that long."

The girl interpreted to her father. The father nodded vigorously, beaming. With gestures and nods he spoke twenty unintelligible, disjointed words with increasing emphasis.

The little girl explained: "He says his father had a watch forty years."

"Do you go to the public school? The English school? You speak English well."

"Oh yes, sir," said the girl. "I can read and write English."

The father caught the word, and wagged his head briskly. "Write! Write! Fine! Good!" He lifted his hand and made flourishy motions of writing in the air.

The girl smiled with shy pride. The young man thought she would like to give an exhibition of her skill. She looked at the lead pencil which the baby had fished from the young man's pocket. But there was no paper.

Presently the girl asked, "Are there works in your watch?" She was holding it very gingerly.

"Oh yes; you can see them. Press the spring—no, this way. Now open the other lid with your thumb nail, or have your father do it."

The maid and her father were admiring the nest of little wheels. He was explaining to her, benignantly; she was pointing, her finger carefully held off from the costly mechanism. But the baby was interested, stooping and reaching with eager, clumsy hands. A determined lunge brought the chubby fingers too near. The girl snapped the inner case shut in time. The young man shook his head at the baby, smiling softly.

The maid looked at the shining closed inner case. By and by she suggested, "There's a nice picture in your watch."

"Yes—a picture." He took the watch in his hand. On the inner side of the lid was a photograph of a young woman holding a baby.

The baby's face was laid against hers. She was smiling a little, proudly, fondly.

The young man stared down at it. He scarcely heard the girl saying, "Do you know the lady?" and he answered mechanically, "Yes, I know the lady."

The photograph was faded, but to him it seemed to be coming to life. The fixed lineaments seemed ready to move, the lips to speak, the eyes to lighten, the absurd, belligerent baby fist to open and reach out.

The maid was asking, far away, "Is it her baby?" He was answering, somewhere, "Yes, it is her baby."

He raised his eyes and looked slowly over the garden. His glance rested a moment on two conspicuous figures at the upper end.

He closed the watch and put it in his pocket, and turned to the little girl with a faint smile.

"So you can write English?"

"Yes, sir."

"Let's see you write something for me."

He gave her the pencil. In his coat pocket he found a crumpled laundry bill, which he spread on the table, the blank side up. The maid, pencil in hand, squared herself before the paper, looking very important.

"At the top of the paper here write 'Walter.' Can you spell 'Walter'? Now capital 'F'. Then capital 'L' and 'o-v-e-r-i-n-g'. 'Walter F. Lovering.' That's good. Then under it, 'S-y-r-a-c-u-s-e, New York.' Now under that 'Wanted.' You can spell 'wanted,' can't you? The next is a hard one. Begin with a capital 'E', then 'm-b-e-z', now another 'z' and 'l-e-m-e-n-t'. There!"

He surveyed the result in the girl's large upright childish characters.

"Now take that, just that way, and run over there and show it to those two policemen, and tell them I sent you. Oh, it will be all right. You'll see. One of the policemen is a friend of mind, and I'm going with him. Just say I sent you."

He spoke with some authority, but he nodded encouragingly. The girl obediently trotted away. The father, who had followed the nods and gestures, looked at the young man, then after the girl; not understanding, but beaming at the odd game, whatever it might be.

But the young man did not look after her. His eyes were averted. His nervous hands fumbled at the baby a moment. Then he lifted the child to his breast and laid its arms around his neck. He felt the jerky motions of its little limbs against him. Its hands brushed about his neck and hair.

He heard a heavy footfall near the table, and looked up at the big

blue-coated officer who stood by, evidently puzzled, but ready. He kissed the baby, handed it over to the father, and stood up.

"I'm the man," he said quietly.

The policeman looked down at his piece of paper, folded it methodically with his big fingers, and put it in his vest pocket.

"I remember something about it," he said, as though he felt under a kind of politely social impulse from the circumstances of the affair. "It was a bank, wasn't it?"

"Yes, a bank."

"'Bout six months ago?" the officer suggested.

The young man gave a long sigh. "Four months," he answered. He drew his hand across his eyes. Then, quietly, as one making a reasonable explanation of an odd action, he added, "My God, I want to go home." ♫

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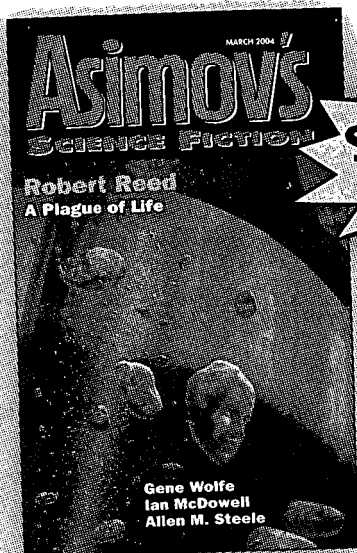
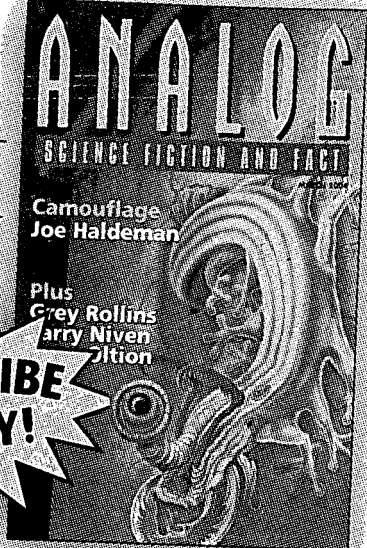
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THE STORY THAT WON

The March Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Charles Schaeffer of Bethesda, Maryland. Honorable mentions go to Pamela Karavolos of Rosamond, California; Glen A. Hunter of Flagstaff, Arizona; Lorna M. Kaine of Oviedo, Florida; Tom Polick of Chicago, Illinois; John Meszaros of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Art Cosing of Fairvax, Virginia; Frank Peirce of College Station, Texas; Hanna H. Dybilasz of Orlando, Florida; and J. M. Magrini of Oakbrook Terrace, Illinois.



Stephen Wolf/Graphstock

SLIP-UP CHARLES SCHAEFFER

"You're an angel most of the time," Alice's mother said. "But horns and a pitchfork suit you fine some days."

"But I want to go as an angel," Alice pleaded.

Her mother sighed. "All right, I'll make an angel costume."

As an angel, Alice fit the part.

"When you go out," her mother warned, "go only to the three neighbors we know."

"But the little railroad station on the corner? I'm friends with the ticket man."

"All right, but no other places. Trick-or-treating is fun. But it's dangerous too."

To the first lady, Alice said, "Trick or treat."

"My," said the woman. "I'll bet the little angel would like an apple."

At the second house, the baby-sitter handed Alice an orange. The father at the third house said, "Here's a healthy yellow banana."

Surely the ticket man would have candy. Alice trooped up the rickety wooden steps to the door. "Trick or treat," Alice called out. A man who looked like he was buying a ticket turned, holding a gun. "No treats here, brat," snapped the gunman. "Only the sweet dough I get from the cash drawer. Beat it, kid."

Alice dropped her apple and orange, but left a banana peel on the top step. Far down the train platform, she turned. She saw the gunman slip. His weapon soared into the air. The ticket man grabbed it and called to Alice: "Tell your mother to phone the police. Then come back. I've got a box of strawberry lollypops!"

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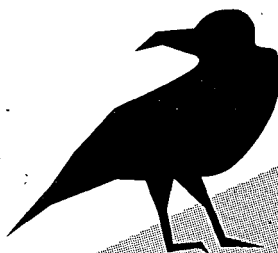
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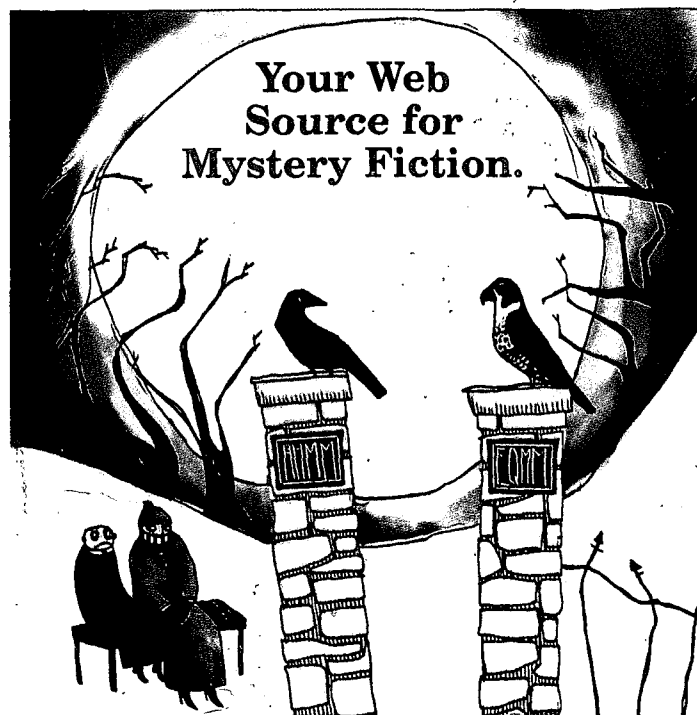
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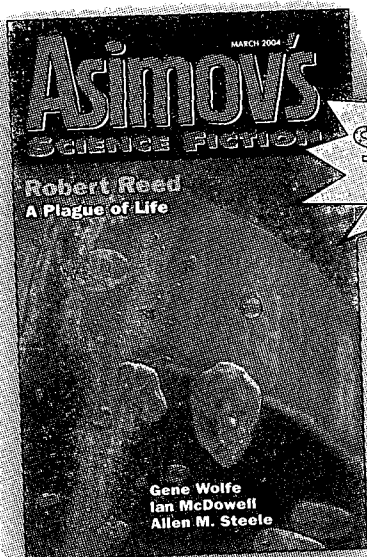
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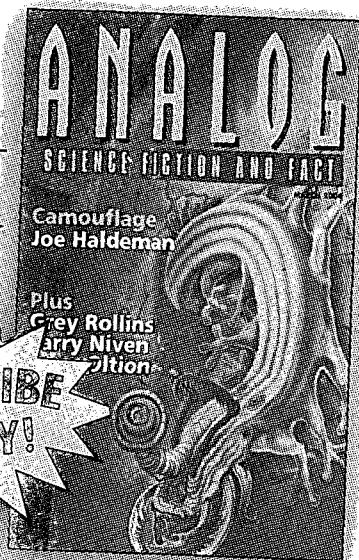
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blue-coated officer who stood by, evidently puzzled, but ready. He kissed the baby, handed it over to the father, and stood up.

"I'm the man," he said quietly.

The policeman looked down at his piece of paper, folded it methodically with his big fingers, and put it in his vest pocket.

"I remember something about it," he said, as though he felt under a kind of politely social impulse from the circumstances of the affair. "It was a bank, wasn't it?"

"Yes, a bank."

" 'Bout six months ago?" the officer suggested.

The young man gave a long sigh. "Four months," he answered. He drew his hand across his eyes. Then, quietly, as one making a reasonable explanation of an odd action, he added, "My God, I want to go home." ♀

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